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AGNES OF THE BADLANDS

J. BRECKENRIDGE ELLIS

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AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS

AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS

BY

J. BRECKENRIDGE ELLIS

AUTHOR OF "FRAN," "LAHOMA," "THE WOODNETS," ETC.

NEW YORK

THE MACAULAY COMPANY

KD11758



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TO MY MOTHER

**Always faithful, always true—
Cooling touch in summer glare,
Warm heartbeats in winter care—
The best I have, I bring to you.**

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. THE DANCE OF THE WINE GLASSES	11
II. CELLAR PHILOSOPHY	22
III. AGNES PURSUES HER QUEST	32
IV. AGNES SEEKS HER FORTUNE	39
V. WITHIN THE PALACE GATES	44
VI. THE FIRE DANCE	56
VII. THE QUEEN'S RIVAL	62
VIII. SECRETS AND SWEET POTATOES	68
IX. THE WARNING	76
X. AGNES' LOVE LETTER	79
XI. AGNES DISAPPEARS	88
XII. BEHIND PRISON WALLS	93
XIII. MAKING FRIENDS WITH THE JAILER	100
XIV. CLEM DISCOVERS THE LETTER	104
XV. WHAT AGNES FOUND IN THE BUREAU DRAWER	108
XVI. AGNES FREES A PRISONER	111
XVII. CLEM GIVES AGNES A SURPRISE	115
XVIII. CLEM MUST HAVE BIG MONEY	118
XIX. CLEM TO THE RESCUE	122
XX. FLOWERS, A CAT AND A FRIEND	128
XXI. AN ATTEMPT AT ESCAPE	134
XXII. CLEM LEAVES THE BAD LANDS	140
XXIII. AGNES MEETS AN OLD FRIEND	147

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
XXIV. THE HAY MA'S DAUGHTER	155
XXV. HAY-DREAMS	161
XXVI. THE SONG THAT KEPT ALIVE	168
XXVII. THE STORM	174
XXVIII. WHERE CLEM'S DAUGHTER LIVED	182
XXIX. THE SOUTH BREEZE BLOWS	189
XXX. WHERE AGNES WAS BORN	194
XXXI. AGNES' INTRODUCTION TO CLEM'S DAUGHTER	201
XXXII. JASMINE'S LOVERS	208
XXXIII. THE FIRST KISS	206
XXXIV. "ROSES ARE RED"	212
XXXV. THE FAREWELL LETTER	217
XXXVI. THE HOME OF VANISHED FACES	225
XXXVII. "LIVING IT DOWN"	229
XXXVIII. PHILIP OR THEODORE?	234
XXXIX. THEODORE'S PICNIC	239
XL. PHILIP'S COMING	244
XLI. LOVE DEFERRED	250
XLII. AGNES' LOVERS	255
XLIII. THE ENGAGEMENT	263
XLIV. IN THE ROSE ARBOR	268
XLV. A MAN WHO WOULDN'T "GO BY"	273
XLVI. THE SONG OUT OF THE PAST	276
XLVII. JOHN EARLE'S RETURN	281
XLVIII. CLEM'S DAUGHTER	294
XLIX. THE ENGAGEMENT ENDED	299
L. A LIFE FOR A LIFE	295
LI. LOVE FINDS A VOICE	300

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

I

THE DANCE OF THE WINE GLASSES

SO aimlessly interwoven were the dark and narrow streets where Agnes lived that you could not reach Shady Court from any direction if you went straight. Was it because the frowsy men and slatternly women never went straight in the domain of morals that their feet staggered around blind corners and over uneven cobblestones with unerring certainty? Of the children that swarmed in the greasy gloom or played in the one hour's sunshine that streamed over high walls when the day was right, there was no record that any, even the youngest on his legs, was ever lost. That would have been luck too good for Shady Court in the Bad Lands.

Not very far from the river stood the three tenement houses whose joined faces formed a square letter C; follow the smoke from the soap factory when

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

the wind blows east, and you'll find it. In the center of the square C stood an iron figure apparently an idol of extravagant worship before which women and children bowed themselves and danced fantastically and from which they departed bent to one side from the burden of the blessing bestowed. It was a pump, this idol, and the child of seven who left it a good many times a day to toil up three flights of steps with a brimming pail was Agnes.

She knew a great deal in spite of her few years, for though she could not have spelled "dog" for you, other knowledge she had mastered which one does not reach in the very highest studies. For instance, when from a third-story window of the middle tenement a woman's harsh voice called "*Aggie!*"—she understood that if a bucket of water were not quickly snatched thither, blows and kicks would prove that water *must* flow uphill. Also, she was skilful in Being Elsewhere when her father was drunk, for at such times he did not like people and was most violent to those he knew best.

Whatever Mrs. Earle did with that water, it was not personally applied. There were of course "washings," but her charity did not begin at home. Jack used to say, referring to the nauseating odors from the factory, "I've smelled soap all my life and I've never used it." Five years older than his step-sister, Jack already belonged to a "gang" which was just as hostile to soap whether they smelled its daily

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

odors or not; but being one of many heroes did not insure him from Mrs. Earle's broad red hand, nor did the circumstance that he was her only offspring.

"I aim to treat 'em both alike," Mrs. Earle often declared, straining her impartiality to the point of beating both when either offended. As the janitor explained it, "When Cindy Bidds gets mad, she's got to take it out on somebody or die of applepexy." Jack's mother was Cindy Bidds before Mr. Earle strayed into the Bad Lands from some upper sphere, and there were those who declared that she was Cindy Bidds still; at any rate, the name fitted too well not to cling.

Life was not all a smell of rancid fats for Agnes, since often the wind curled the thick yellow factory smoke elsewhere; nor were blows incessant—sometimes Jack Bidds passed her on the stairs without pulling her hair, sometimes her father was too drunk to chase her across the court, or too sober to swear at her. Mrs. Earle was not always emitting the sinister whine of a threatening tornado, for she drank while she had money to spend, which took her from home.

To be left quite alone in that small room where all the washing and eating and sleeping took place seemed to Agnes very pleasant. She could look down into the paved court of dirty walls and foul corners and watch weak-backed children running to the pump and staggering sideways away, she could

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

listen to a child's screaming accompanied by the thud of heavy blows, and if the sky were clear of clouds and smoke, could sometimes see the sun. And because in Agnes' world the lot of one was the lot of all, and one's standard can be no higher than the best one knows, Agnes was sometimes happy.

But not very often, for usually she was afraid; afraid not only of her father's curses, her step-mother's blows, her stepbrother's harshness, but afraid of the children in Smoky Court. She did not know why she was different from them, nor did they. When they gathered in obscure doorways to chatter like old women, so skinny their arms, so peering their little eyes into which a snakey glitter darted when vice dripped from the tongue, Agnes shrank away with loathing; hence when they shouted in the few innocent games of the Bad Lands, nobody would play with Agnes. Into their baby brains, repetition had driven, first of all, oaths such as Agnes would not utter. She didn't know why. "I just don't swear," she used to apologize. For this they hated her.

But perhaps they hated her more because she looked different. They might have excused her for keeping herself so clean, and her hair so orderly because everybody knew this was in the way of business. She was very pretty, maybe because she washed her face, but it was the difference of her eyes that aroused resentment. Though large, they

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

were not bold and hard; though dark, they were neither savage nor sly. What were they? No one knew except that in them lay the shadows of fear. What was she afraid of? Who was *she*, to be afraid? How they loved to taunt, to persecute her, to chase her to her den! . . .

At night, after Mr. and Mrs. Earle had stopped quarreling and Jack and Agnes returned from the corridor whither they had fled to avoid blows, she would softly crawl to her pallet to dream of a place where nobody was ever afraid. There was grass not in boxes nor squeezed in chinks, but running wild, and a big house with no rags stuffed in broken windows. One must step up, or if very young, even climb, to get into a bed in that dream-house; and in bed, one could not hear all night the crunch of heavy boots on sodden bricks, the toiling up and down stairs with violent slammings of doors, the rattle of glasses, the curses, blows and cries of pain—for the first floor of the house where there was no fear, was not a saloon.

Of course, all saloons are not alike, and the one in which she earned her father's drink-money was as splendid as glass and gilt can be when many lights are burning. And she was splendid, too, at Doc Hagan's Golden Gleam, for twice a week she went thither in a marvel of a dress all decorated with tinsel and spangles, and to the frank admiration of the drinkers, danced the Dance of the Wine Glasses.

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

But even when hushed tongues proved her at her best, even when applause burst forth, she was afraid lest a misstep send her limping from the table with a bleeding foot, for when that once happened her father was terribly angry; he did not have enough to drink, that time.

One Saturday night, she thought he had forgotten to come for her, and after putting on the gauzy dress kept for such occasions in a box all to itself, she crouched waiting in the Warm Corner with her dingy cloak buttoned tight. A dull glow showed through the open door of the little stove standing where two of the blackest walls met. That was the Warm Corner. Sometimes when Mrs. Earle was “doing the washing,” it was so hot between the stove and the angle that you couldn’t stand there, no matter how cold you might be! But in the evenings Mrs. Earle was usually “out,” and when coal is bought by the pail it can’t be wasted just to keep warm a girl like Agnes.

As the bare floor grew cold and the walls cool, Agnes stared at greasy outlines on the plastering, finding here the picture of a horse, there the outline of a man crawling out of a gutter . . . Would her father never come? Her breath “made a smoke,” and when she pressed her hand to the warmest spot of the Warm Corner, there came no sense of comfort. Her alarm was great lest her mother return first. Mrs. Earle knew if she tried to lay by a penny for a

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

rainy day, her husband would seize it to spend it over the bar, therefore she spent it over the bar on her own account, and often staggered up the three flights to her bedroom thinking she saw half a dozen. At such times she was unreasonable, and the sight of Agnes in her finery was as a red flag to other animals as unreasonable.

However, on this particular Saturday, Mr. Earle staggered in first, secured his violin and nodded to Agnes to follow him out into the cold blast. Arrived at Doc Hagan's Golden Gleam, warmth and fragrance enwrapped them. It was always pleasant on first passing between the swinging glass doors. There were five long mirrors, their surfaces veiled with muslin, their frames as golden as the golden bar, and there were pictures of lovely women high up on the walls, some of them with wings, some with nothing, absolutely. It was all very wonderful and would have been perfect but for coarse red faces, loud voices, beery odors and fixed stares.

She passed through the crowd as if seeing no one, went to a closet where she removed her cloak and hood, shoes and stockings, and came back ethereal little white-and-gold fairy. Those who had seen her in her coarse wraps could hardly believe their eyes when this sprite climbed upon a table set in the middle of the room, and stood with bare arms crossed over glittering stars and silver moons. Doc Hagan, his cigar tipped up at one corner of his mouth, came

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

forward in business fashion, and set a dozen wine glasses on the mahogany surface, some filled with red wine, some with white. Between the glasses were left spaces not much larger than Agnes' feet.

On a chair near by, her father played a noisy galloping air and Agnes danced among the wine glasses. The men at the bar, and others lounging about the room, looked on with nods, with foolish grins, or with drunken gravity. When one crowd drifted out another streamed through the doors, money and glasses clinked as faces changed, but she danced on and on, not pausing except to cast to her father the coins careless hands threw upon the table.

She whirled about like a top, she rose upon her toes in mincing steps, she wove ribbons about the glasses, jumped over one after the other, showed how close she could leap to thin edges without harm; she shuffled all around the edge of the table then jumped backward into the middle space. And as she leaped and spun about, the shapeliness of her girlish limbs and body set off by the semi-transparent dress, was a delight to the eye, while her movements, skilful from long practise, seemed without effort. As light as drifting feathers seemed her tiny feet flashing amidst glittering glass and crimson wine, their snowy whiteness spinning twinkling columns of light across the polished wood.

But there was one looking on who discovered the

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

dew of exhaustion on her brow and lip. And when her father, excited by her agility, played faster and faster, thinking of the moment when he would send her home that he might stay through the night to enjoy her earnings, this looker-on suddenly cried out, "As God lives, man, you're killing her!"

Agnes stopped suddenly, and though unutterably weary, stared at the man as if conscious only of him and his words.

"Yes, that's enough," Doc Hagan declared, with an eye to business. Although Mr. Earle grumbled, his pocket rattled very comfortably and the scowl he gave Agnes for betraying her weakness was perfunctory rather than expressive of anger. He would let her off this time, said the scowl, but just let it happen again . . .

Late the next day when Mr. Earle crawled out of his bed of straw, and slouched uncombed and red of eye from the room, Agnes stole after him like a shadow. Not until they were in the court did he discover that he was followed. "Don't you sneak along behind *me*," he growled. "Your mother wants you." However, something in her wistful eyes made him pause to add, not unkindly, "Besides, it's cold out here."

It was bitter cold, but of that she did not seem conscious. "Papa——" she was shy, but very eager, "did you notice what that man said last night at Doc Hagan's?"

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

He stared. “What man? When? What do you want, anyway?”

“Papa,” her words came in an impetuous breath, “he said God lives. *Does He?*”

As he grasped her arm his face grew black. In the midst of a noisy, ever-changing crowd of the thinly-clad poor, his anger and her fears passed unobserved.

“If you ever mention that name again”—he shook her violently—“if you do—listen, Agnes, do you hear? *What? Do you?* If you ever speak that name again where I can hear, I’ll—I’ll kill you!”

She was used to his rages, especially on mornings following the Dance of the Wine Glasses, but never before had she known him so furious.

As he glared into her eyes, his hand tightening cruelly upon her arm, he rushed on in burning words that gave vent to long smoldering passion. “I came to the Bad Lands to forget Him. I left a different kind of life from this because I was afraid of Him. Do you hear? That’s why I drink and live like a dog where He’s not known. I’m hiding—I’m hiding——”

The frenzy of last night’s debauch shook him in its reawakened power, and Agnes cried out in futile terror.

“And I’m going to forget Him, do you hear? I *will* forget Him! I’d destroy anything in Heaven or earth that made me remember Him. Do you hear?”

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

That means you, Agnes, that means *you*. Quick, now—are you ever going to mention Him to me again?"

"No, no—papa, you are hurting me so——"

"That's the reason I'm in the Bad Lands, where nobody knows or cares anything about Him. I *won't* think of Him! I'll live and die away from Him, just, as I expect to live and burn in hell away from Him. I won't have Him brought into my life—He has cast me off, and I've cast *Him* off."

"Papa, papa, I won't ever——"

"Never mind promising"—he released her arm and she fell back white and panting—"you needn't say a word. But you just mention Him to me again—just once, just *once*—that's all!"

For a moment he stood looking at her with the insane glare that always made her feel as if he were a stranger. Then his rigid body relaxed, he dropped his well-formed but shaggy head upon his breast, and his legs trembled as from too great a weight, as he shuffled aimlessly away.

II

CELLAR PHILOSOPHY

PARTLY because it was a forbidden name, partly because her father had fled from a better life to avoid hearing it mentioned, Agnes from that night wondered a great deal about God. She had supposed it merely a word to swear with, but the man who had taken pity upon her had shown by his indignant protest that it was not merely an oath, it was the name of a Person, a Person her father had known when the grass was not confined to boxes and pavement-chinks, and the unctuous odors of soap in the making were unknown, and the sun was not a yellow ball in a smoky sky, nor the river suggestive of the morgue. It was a great mystery to the child that everybody should know the name, but nobody could tell her about it, and when she thought of the big house far from the Bad Lands with no rags stuffed in window-holes, with no beds rolled up in a corner by day, she made a new dream and put God in it.

She asked her stepmother timidly if she knew God lived—and was sorry she asked, since Mrs. Earle regarded the question as a reproach. What a

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

little creature Agnes was, to have so great a rage “taken out” on her! But Mrs. Earle knew from experience that after she had pulled hair and beaten tender flesh till her arm wearied, she would feel better. Jack did not meet the question so brutally, merely advised, cynically, that she ask her father.

Since one feeds upon blows and irony in the Bad Lands, Agnes was strengthened to the heroic point of asking the janitor, he who seemed to know everything and had occasionally been kind to her. But he was not kind to her when it came to a discussion of God, and even the policeman interfered as she was being kicked out the door—the policeman who almost never interfered, indeed, was seldom seen, because he “stood in”; Agnes had never discovered his standing-niche.

After that, she decided not to make inquiries of strong people, but all the time she was wondering and wondering, hoping by some accident to find out what she wanted to know, waiting for the right person to come with the knowledge, and building up for herself an image of God out of the fairest bits of that dream-country in which He and her father had known each other.

One night when the sleet was pelting the walls and pavement of Shady Court, Mr. Earle called his daughter from the Warm Corner—which after all was not warm—to dance at the Golden Gleam; and he was so drunk that as they went down the

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

steep and greasy stairs—one bracketed lamp to each flight—she thought more than once that he would surely fall. Outside, he slipped and almost dropped his violin. The pointed glass box on top of the lamp-post was all encrusted, and white veils swung over unwashed windows; even the pump was beautiful. Before they reached the distant saloon, Agnes was shuddering from the cold—her father had never made the journey so slowly; and, once seated in the warmth and glow of Doc Hagan’s, he had never played so wildly.

Agnes soon saw that she would not be able to keep up with his crazed playing, for the thirst that must be quenched was upon the man and in its grip he was as merciless as it. The little bare feet flew like mad among the wine glasses—snow seemed dissolving in liquid fire; the whirling body became a floating mist against the gold and glass of the splendid wall, the streaming hair floated out in silken masses above the bare outstretched arms, the bosom rose and fell tempestuously from the surging of the frightened little heart. But her father, in fancy quaffing divine nectar, quickened the movement, poured forth prodigal notes from his exhaustless store and closed his eyes to her suffering.

Then, suddenly, when she felt that she must fall across the table upon those brittle edges of sparkling glass, that her blood must mingle with the wine, unless she could rest her limbs, she called out plead-

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

ingly, "Papa, oh, papa!" But her wail did not reach his ears because, just then, he could hear only the voice of his desire.

She reeled. And as she was about to fall, her widened eyes discovered close to the table's margin the man who knew about God. Her arms went out to his instinctively, and in a moment he had lifted her from her perilous position to the floor. Sometimes there are happy chances—mere luck—even in the Bad Lands. Of course, he had hurried forward on hearing her appeal to her father; but that the violin should at that moment have flown from Mr. Earle's frantic grasp and that its neck should have been broken off against the floor, could not be explained so logically. To her mind, it "just happened," and by happening, saved her a beating.

To Mr. Earle, also, it seemed good luck, for already the harvest of small change had been gathered. The broken violin belonged to the morrow, and could that be considered with the night before him? Roughly he ordered Agnes home—"It's all your fault: Just you wait till I come!" he growled, not really meaning to beat her, but wishing to appear justified in the eyes of the world.

When Agnes opened the door the fiercely-driven sleet made her cry out. It was a storm and she was afraid. "Come ahead," said the man who knew about God, "I'll go along with you." The white grains cut her face like tiny particles of flying glass, and

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

about the far-apart lamp-posts, she saw sheets of mingled snow and hail driven and twisted and shaken out and wound round and round and torn to shreds while the wind swept the slippery streets bare as if making ready for a ball to which only ice-maidens were expected. It wasn't any use for Agnes to hold her ragged cloak tight, or stamp along as if there were no holes in her shoes; only a short distance from the Golden Gleam she was so cold that it couldn't be borne, so she burst into wild sobbing.

“You're all right,” said the comfortable man, picking her up as easily and carrying her as lightly as if she were but another snowflake in the black night. “I've got a cellar around the corner and you can scrooch there till the worst is over, if you think your ma won't care.”

Agnes knew she wouldn't care. Besides, what if she did? A person couldn't go home in a storm like that. Presently the man stopped, raised a heavy door that was really part of the pavement, and then an iron grating; and then he said, “Scoot down the ladder.”

There was a ladder, sure enough, and in a twinkling there was Agnes at the bottom of it, with the door closed overhead and the man striking a match and the world so far away you felt you might never get back to it. “Cellars is mighty nice,” Agnes remarked. “I was in one once before. They'd killed a man there a long, long, long time ago. We went

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

to see the bones. They was laying there." She dwelt upon the picture musingly until the lighted lantern brought out of the blackness the man's burly shoulders, the great hat sparkling with ice, and the smooth large-featured face.

The lantern dipped forward and she saw the bare uneven earth; it bobbed upward and there were blackened stone walls, gnarled beams and the heavy door with its rusted network; and when he hung it on its nail, the glow was upon his strong young head. "Now for a fire," he cried cheerily, "and then for something to eat." He thought of everything worth while! Nothing in all the world was just then worth a snap of Agnes' fingers but a fire and something to eat.

The little coal stove showed a red spot on one cheek which meant that there would soon be a breaking out of red all over, and as Agnes perched upon a goods box eating smoked halibut, and the man, on a larger box, watched her, the howling of the wind added music to the enjoyment like the strident graphophone outside the moving-picture show.

"Do you want to see how much I can eat?" Agnes asked confidentially. "I'm just awful at it, mamma says. She's my other one. The first died and was put in the ground where they's grass and statues. Papa says it ain't ever cold down in the ground, but I've never wanted to die, seemed kinder lonesome somehow, always."

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

“It *is* lonesome, Aggie. Let’s be living! I’m Alley Jim, if you want my name. I’m eighteen years old, and never been downed.”

“Names ain’t nothing to me, seems like,” she confided. “It’s ‘him’ and ‘her’ with me. I guess you ain’t him that leads the gang”—she started at the mere suspicion.

“Used to.”

“I would never of thought!” Agnes watched him with great eyes while she rapidly disposed of the last morsels. “I would never, never, *never* of thought! Such awful things as I kept myself awake o’nights trying to forget—and you *him*! But I ain’t afeared.”

He displayed his muscle. “I’m awful strong, Aggie.”

“Don’t care if you are, I ain’t afeared. You ain’t like I thought. Shut up in a cellar, too! And feeding little girls!”

“I’m different, that’s why.”

With arms hugging her knees, she kept staring. “What makes you different, Alley Jim, if you wasn’t ever downed?”

He shook his big head. “I’m going as hard as ever, kid, but I’ve changed directions, that’s all I know.”

Agnes said, suddenly, “Oh, yes, and now’t I’ve got you where I want you—what made you say God lives? Tell me about Him. Papa won’t let me speak

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

His name, and mamma is worse, and I don't know *who* to go to.”

The young man rubbed his head slowly. “Yes, I reckon God ain't no favorite in the Bad Lands, but it's little I know and less I can tell, for I was never no speaker or public character of any kind. I get at it in this way: Who made the world?”

She considered this for some time, surprised that so large a matter had never before occurred to her. “Nobody, I guess,” was her conclusion; “it was here ever since I was.”

Alley Jim was argumentative. “Now you take the stars, to say nothing of the sun and moon. Who done 'em? They must have been stirred together and rolled out and baked and mixed like anything else. You never see a frankfurter pop up out of the ground, nobody knowing how come it, people saying it just happened like a stone. No, sir. When you see victuals you know there was a cook back of 'em. Well! And whenever you see a star you can know somebody whittled it out of shiny stuff and stuck it in the sky to do its twinkling, it didn't just blossom there like a geranium in a pot. And God makes all them things that men can't make; if He hadn't, who'd a-made 'em? That's how you come. Me, too. Everybody. You go out and try to make a man, and what'll you do? Make a fizzle, that's all. And yet you're made, don't say you ain't, for there you sit. Me, too. Who done it? Don't it

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

seem reasonable? Why, it's been true all the time, but nobody never carted the idea around in front of you where you could see the fruit.”

“But wouldn't I of been, if God hadn't made me? Or papa—or nobody?”

“Nobody in the world. I ain't no public character, but on this I can speak decided.”

Agnes meditated for some time over this astonishing revelation, then a smile stole to her parted lips. “I like to be made, Jim. But don't I love God for making me? Well, I guess!” She laughed, tenderly. “I love Him more than—more than *anything*. I'd think ever'body would. I'd think papa would. Why don't people love God for making 'em?”

“'Cause they sees they're such poor jobs I reckon—but I can't explain nothing. I got on to it this way: One day I was prowling around as sure-enough Alley Jim—reckon you've seen me in the papers if you're old enough to read pictures—and a stranger steps up to me with, ‘Brother, God lives and loves you.’ I thought him crazy, so let him go, didn't knock him down or nothing.”

“Did God send him to tell you that?”

“*Hum!* Mebbe. Next time he run across me, just by chance, about a week later, he stops and says, ‘Whosoever will—and that means you and me, Jim,’ he says, ‘can have the water of life freely if only they believe,’ he says.”

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

"Believe what?" Agnes demanded eagerly.

"I dunno, exactly. And don't ask me what the water of life is, either, for I ain't capable. Well, I made up my mind to queer that guy, so I looked him up. But when I found out that he was a rich man and had left a fine home and all his friends to come to live in the Bad Lands like the rest of us—and what do you reckon his business is?"

"S'loon-keeper?"

"'Course not. He don't do nothing but go about and talk to the fellows about God. They swear at him, sometimes they listen—he don't get no pay."

She suggested, "Maybe God pays him."

"Mebbe. Well, when I found out all this I felt queer, and I've been different ever since. His name is Mr. Philip Brown—reckon that's nothing to you, but, somehow, that's the easiest name to my ears I ever heard. We've had long talks and there's work he wants me to do. I'm making up my mind whether to join in with him, or go back to the gang, and meanwhile I'm hiding in this cellar to keep away from all of 'em."

"I wish I could ask that man what the water of life is."

"He could tell you. He stands in with God," said Alley Jim, with deep conviction. "I'd have asked him about it only I didn't want to know. I got to make up my mind which way to turn. God's all right, but Alley Jim comes first."

III

AGNES PURSUES HER QUEST

WHEN the fury of the storm had abated, Alley Jim carried Agnes home in his great arms—the first time she had ever ridden home from a party!—and when the cold, foul air of the tenement room gripped her as by a material hand, she kept herself almost warm till morning with dreams of the snug cellar, the miracle of having enough to eat, and the picture of the fire's glow on the face of the man that knew about God.

But fairy dreams must vanish with the dawn because the sun never rises on fairyland, and the next day, Agnes was carrying water up, up, up . . . and her stepmother was fighting with her father, whose broken violin left him horribly sober. And on the days following tongues grew more violent, blows rained, objects were hurled, till even the policeman who "stood in" intimated that he could not endure it much longer. In the meantime Jack, according to his wont, disappeared for brief spaces and turned up with marvelous things to wear or sell, just like the conjurer who could make anything

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

come to his hand out of the very air. But all the time Agnes was thinking about the cellar and what she had heard down there, and it seemed to her that these thoughts got between her back and Mrs. Earle's fist, so that the pain was not so great as it used to be; and when she was called vile names, somehow these thoughts were like cotton in her ears.

All the time she was wondering how to find out more about God; but although she often slipped from Shady Court to the heavy door in the pavement around the block from Golden Gleam, the door was always shut, and when at last she summoned courage to inquire of the second-hand clothes-man whose shop adjoined, she learned that Alley Jim had gone away. The cellar had another tenant who knew nothing of Jim, not even that his picture had once been in the papers.

There was a girl of about twelve or thirteen who lived with her invalid mother in a cuddyhole up under the roof. Agnes thought maybe Jenny Tildy, who looked unlike the other children of the court, might know what she wanted to learn; but Jenny Tildy went to the factory so early and stayed so late that she was always too tired and cross for conversation. Once she had given Agnes an apple. A person doesn't forget an event like that.

Then Winsie came back to Shady Court and took her big room on the second floor as she always did after absences of weeks or months. No wonder

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

Agnes admired her, because she was so pretty—just like a big pink doll, all peach-bloom and cream. When she walked across the court the bright colors of her wonderful dress flashed through the murkiness like a rainbow. And when she stood at her window with her hair all down and her teeth in the light, and her red lips pouting, Agnes saw in a flash that this must be one who knew about God. So as soon as she could get away from her parents who were having the Big Fuss—as it afterwards proved—each threatening to go away forever and the other daring him to do it—Agnes went down to the large room.

Winsie, who was seated on the edge of her pretty bed reading an illustrated journal, stared at the child without much expression, somewhat as a doll opens its blue eyes when a spot is touched. She knew Agnes as a "queer one" with whom she was not at ease, but in spite of this, had secretly felt drawn to her during the three years of Mr. Earle's sojourn in Old Shady. She had never yielded to the attraction and was now on her guard. "Come on with it, kiddie, then clear out, for I'm reading," was her way of asking what Agnes wanted.

Agnes stood just within the door, one foot half-way up the other leg, her hands twisting and untwisting her short ragged skirt.

"Winsie, do you know about God?" she inquired wistfully.

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

Winsie's face was no longer like an enameled mask, smooth and prettily regular, all peach-blossom and cream. It darkened and showed ugly lines, and when she laughed, her voice was harsh and rebellious. Agnes was so discomfited, however, that Winsie's narrowed eyes relaxed, finding no sinister designs in the other's countenance. She contented herself with crying out petulantly, "There ain't any God."

Agnes' face grew pale. "Oh!" she wailed. "*Isn't* there?"

"No! You hear what I'm telling you? There ain't any God." She was more and more excited, and the little foot in the shiny shoe that had been swinging airily, stamped upon the floor. "Do you think things would be like they are if there was One? Do you think I'd be here, or you'd be there and rich people would live off of us and break our hearts and throw us into the gutter—— No, there ain't *any* God. None at all." And she flung out her arms in a way no doll ever showed, and grasped her long perfumed hair in a sudden paroxysm by no means unusual in the Bad Lands.

"But," Agnes faltered doubtfully, "who made the stars?"

"There ain't any God, there ain't any God!" Winsie was violent. She spoke as one who knows from the deepest experiences of a wrecked life: "There ain't any God!"

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

Agnes stared at her dumbly. And as she stared, the tears slowly gathered in her eyes. Then she whispered with a catch in her breath, “I’m awful sorry. Ain’t you?”

After a pause, Winsie said chokingly, “Come here.” And when Agnes was beside her—“Sit down and tell me what you mean.”

So Agnes sat upon the floor at Winsie’s feet because she was not fine enough to sit on the bed, and answered haltingly. “Guess you know Alley Jim? He told me about it. And he said there’s a place, oh, ever and ever so much bigger and warmer than Old Shady where nobody’s hungry or gets beat up or anything bad. And Alley Jim said before you go there you can feel good right here—anywhere, any place—if you believe. ’Cause God’ll give you the water of life. But nobody won’t tell me what I got to believe. Then you come back. I thought if anybody’d know, it’d be you, so pretty and nice and good. But if there ain’t any God, it ain’t no use—nothing is, I guess. But, oh, don’t you wish there just *was* a God?”

After a long silence, Winsie asked shortly, “Why?”

Agnes was surprised. “If anybody was strong enough to make the stars and had a place so nice, and loved me, wouldn’t I be fixed? You’re good to me, and so was Jenny Tildy, once, but I’m just a little girl and can’t pay you back. But if I could

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

make the sky, oh, goodness!” And she looked up at the pretty lady with adoration in her eyes; wonderful gifts would she pour into Winsie’s lap, if able to make the sky!

Winsie reached down and stroked the eager head. “When I was little, somebody used to tell me things about God,” she presently admitted. “Would you like to hear about the garden where weeds didn’t grow?” And as Agnes listened with bated breath, Winsie in an odd, subdued voice talked and talked about the garden where weeds didn’t grow.

But when the story of Adam and Eve was all told and not another question could be asked about the rib or the dust or the fruit tree, Agnes came back to the river of life. “I want to know what to believe, so I can believe it,” she murmured.

While telling the old story, Winsie had been going back and back along the path of her life till she stood at her mother’s knee in a farmhouse with the shadow of silver poplars sliding over the small windowpanes and pigeons scraping on the eaves. The water of life had seemed so much closer there than it did in the Bad Lands, that she did not expect to find the way to it, now, and even to hear it mentioned wrung her heart.

Suddenly Agnes said, “Maybe it’s to believe there’s a God when folks say there ain’t.” But Winsie wouldn’t talk about it any more, and soon sent her away, “never to come back.” For Winsie was very

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

unhappy; her face was distorted, her voice bitter, in every way she seemed utterly unlike the Winsie Agnes had loved from afar. “I don’t want you never to come back, I don’t want you never to ask me anything as long as you live!”

Agnes shrank as from a blow, but after all she was used to blows so only looked at the other sorrowfully as she crept from her place beside the bed.

“You needn’t look at me that way,” cried Winsie, more and more excited. “I don’t care. I mean it. If God was right out there in the hall I’d shut the door in His face.”

Such a strangely different Winsie from the Winsie who had talked about the garden where there were no weeds! Maybe she had shut the door in His face years ago. Agnes went away thrilled over her new knowledge and more than ever determined to keep on hunting until at last she found the river of life.

IV.

AGNES SEEKS HER FORTUNE

THE next morning Agnes opened her eyes wondering at the silence, since usually her step-mother's violent tongue served as rising-bell. The light struggling around the rags in the window-panes showed the bare floor, the discolored walls, the clothes-line stretched across one corner, the empty washtub on edge, and the scrubbing-board which with a bar of yellow soap on its upper tray looked like a small blond baby on very thin legs with its face to the wall. So many familiar objects were missing that her father seemed to take up much more room in his pile of straw than usual, and when he started up and drew on his boots, thus beginning and finishing his toilet, he looked like a giant. Maybe the cut across his cheek and mouth added to his grandeur, but he was always larger when the two hundred and eighty pounds of Mrs. Earle were beyond the horizon.

"*Ugh!*" grunted Mr. Earle, looking about, "it's freezing cold and the bucket's empty."

Agnes, taking it kindly that he should throw her these conversational crumbs, asked brightly, "Where

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

is everybody, papa?”—meaning Mrs. Earle and Jack, the magician.

If Mr. Earle had anything to impart, he'd impart it without being questioned. His roving eye fell upon the tub and the ax; they instantly suggested contact and with hearty blows he began knocking the tub to pieces. It was as if he were blotting from the book of Agnes' life the symbol of her stepmother, and it meant, also, a fire in the making.

“Oh, how good!” cried Agnes, exulting.

Mr. Earle mashed his finger and roared out under the conviction that it couldn't have happened if she hadn't been there:

“You clear out of that before I beat you out of the straw with a stave. I guess you do think it's *good*, me up here freezing to death and you crouching and crooning there in a fat warm bed.”

Agnes shivered out of the “fat warm bed,” drew ice-cold shoes upon her cold feet, threw her hair out of her eyes, shook herself—and was up for the day. Mr. Earle, who had not shaken himself, and therefore rode divers straws upon his person, grabbed the coffee-pot, half full of yesterday's grounds, and rushed to the water-bucket. He was so angry to find the bucket empty that he had half a mind to chop it up for fuel. Instead he handed it to Agnes in silence. There was no use to tell her what he wanted; she knew it wasn't a bouquet.

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

With her shawl'drawn closely about her head she dipped down the evil-smelling flights of stairs out into the court where the air stuck her with needles and came back incredibly soon with an aching back and numbed arms—*boof!* would it always be winter in Old Smoky? but there was a fire going now, and while the coffee warmed she stood in the Warm Corner staring at the wall-outline of what might be a man crawling out of a gutter. When the pot began to smoke, Mr. Earle examined the box where bread and meat was kept when there was any. There wasn't any now, and he expressed his feelings with no uncertain words without, however, blaming Agnes unduly. And when they sipped from pint cups and grew comfortable by standing close enough to the stove—turning first one side then the other—he softened to something like companionship.

"Aggie, you won't see that woman or Jack any more; you and I are the family, now. What's to become of us *I* don't know—starve, or freeze to death, I expect. And the sooner the better . . . there's nothing in *this*."

Agnes thought life tolerably pleasant just then and wanted more of it, so she suggested timidly that he might find work.

"Work? Ain't I miserable enough now? The sooner I'm out of the way the better." He gulped down the coffee, then swore savagely. "I want a

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

drink of whisky!” he suddenly snarled, snatching her cup from her hand and draining it likewise. “I’m in hell right now because I can’t buy a drink. Work? How could I work? I tell you, I can’t think of anything but that. Look here—listen.” He was working himself up to the point from which his natural self shrank ashamed: “You’re young and good-looking. You’ve got to go to begging. Do you hear?”

Agnes shrinkingly admitted that she heard.

“In the morning you’ll work one part of town, in the afternoons, another. Tell ’em how poor you are—you can’t make it too strong. Tell ’em your father is a villain, a devil, a drunkard who’ll beat you black and blue if you come home at night without food and money—you hear? *Money*. Tell ’em your own mother died years ago and her folks kicked your father out because he disgraced ’em with his spreeds; tell ’em he came to the Bad Lands to forget God and has kept you in hell ever since, an’ll kill you if you don’t get him whisky to drink. Tell ’em the truth, just the truth, do you hear?”

“Yes, sir,” she said, faintly.

After their light breakfast, he took from the wall the broken violin, bade her follow him from the cooling room, and led the way to a pawnbroker’s. Two dollars and a quarter was what it brought; and after he had purchased a large basket he thrust the rest deep down into his pocket, but she knew that

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

thrusting it deep down wouldn't keep it down as long as saloons were doing business.

"Here's your basket," he said, then waved his arm toward distant chimneys. "Go get it filled and bring home every crumb you get. Take your pick of the city, suit yourself—go seek your fortune." Then he turned abruptly away to seek a bar. Too deeply dreading a beating from her thirst-crazed father to refuse, yet with an unaccountable aversion to Shady Court's most popular industry, she set forth without the zest usual to heroes when seeking their fortunes.

V

WITHIN THE PALACE GATES

AGNES had not left Shady Court far behind when she saw a dark-faced boy perched upon the outside steps of a rickety old lodging-house. Though in the Bad Lands, its shadow was not upon him; his complexion was a race-darkness, for he was a Jew. Upon his ragged knees he held an illuminated chart and Agnes could not pass its glory of red and purple and gleaming gold.

"What a funny picture!" She set down her basket. "What are they doing?"

He looked up with a scowl, but when he saw her eyes, he smiled. "See, here is the altar . . . that's the burnt offering. Isn't the fire bright! The priests are making a sacrifice to God."

"A sacrifice to God?" she repeated breathlessly, seating herself beside him and staring intently at the picture. "What is a sacrifice?" And she asked many questions.

He pointed at the altar. "God always liked it," he said. "It showed they were his friends."

"Then I will do it," Agnes cried, starting up. "Couldn't I build a fire out on a lot and—and—but

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

I haven't got any goats or bulls." And she looked at him in despair.

"That's nothing. You've got something, I guess. Give it up—burn it—that's a sacrifice."

"But, oh, I haven't anything at all, not anything!"

"All right——" The boy rolled up the picture. "Then you can't be God's friend. *He* don't want to be friends with a girl that hasn't got nothing."

"Oh," cried Agnes, wringing her hands, "if I just had something, He would be my friend!" She faced the tragedy of being poor with blinded eyes.

The boy brightened. "There's your hair. Burn it. It's pretty."

"Is it?" she asked doubtfully, surprised at his assured statement.

"Awful pretty." He ran into the house to get the scissors and came back pleasantly excited. "I know a place. Come on—I'll be the high priest."

It was a long walk to the vacant lot he had in mind, but the sun came out and the cold lost its sting. The Bad Lands were left behind. Business palaces stretched northward, then came splendid mansions; and next door to one of the finest was the vacant lot, disfigured with signboards, strewn with the litter of neglect.

Nobody was passing. The boy gathered together stones for his altar, and under it thrust dead leaves, scraps of paper and a few splinters from decaying boards.

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

“Sit down and be quick,” he ordered, flourishing the scissors, “before the Philistines come.”

Agnes sat flat upon the frozen earth and placed her sacrifice in the hands of the high priest—*Snip! snip!*—then a glorious blaze, and all was over.

“This highest signboard is a wall of Jerusalem,” he announced enjoyingly. “The big house next us is Solomon’s Temple.”

“Who’m I?”

“You can be Jephthah’s daughter or—or the mother of Moses.” At that moment a lady appeared at an upper balcony of the marble palace. “And that’s the Queen of Sheba.”

Agnes unconsciously passed her hand over her head, then burst into tears. She was strange to herself, so roughly cropped; did she look like a boy? Of course, she had wanted to sacrifice her hair—only—if she could at the same time have kept it! She asked, damply, “When it grows out again, will it be mine or God’s?”

This was a nice point of law touching which the high priest could remember no traditional teaching; while considering it, his shrewd eye took in the opening of a side-door of the rich mansion, and the emergence of a footman in bright livery. “The Philistines!” he cried, taking to his heels; “the Philistines are at the gates!” He was gone.

Agnes, still on the ground, found herself looking up at a wonderful man who had blossomed out into

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

red and white as if he were a lady-flower like Winsie, and when she understood that the mistress of Solomon's Temple had sent for her she scrambled up eagerly, not knowing what she might find, but knowing too well what she would leave behind. And when at last she stood in the presence of the mistress she had been so dazzled and awed by the magnificence and the mystery of carpeted halls and statue-adorned stairways that she saw her through a blur of confused lights and shadows. It was not until the splendid Philistine had brought a cloth and placed a table upon it, and put strange food upon the table, and not until Agnes had eaten, that the Queen of Sheba dwindled in proportions to a mere woman. But when hunger was appeased and the remains of the feast had been cleared away, and Agnes and the mistress looked at each other from chairs not far apart, the vision cleared. She was a mere woman, not nearly so large as Mrs. Earle, showing none of Winsie's bright colors, entirely lacking in Winsie's doll-like prettiness; merely an elderly woman—thirty, at least—rather thin, rather weary, with a cut of features, a manner of quiet grace, and a look of the eyes that were more foreign to the Bad Lands than were tribes from the uttermost parts of the earth.

“And now,” the Queen said in a voice so gentle it could frighten no one, and so clear and penetrating no one could dream of refusing to respond, “why

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

did you let the little boy cut off your hair, and why did you cry afterwards?"

"I didn't have any bulls or rams," Agnes explained. As the lady did not seem to take in the import of this reason, she amplified. "I didn't have nothing but my hair. I guess God is an awful good friend of yours, ma'am."

The violet eyes of the lady opened wide and the voice sounded queer as it asked, "Why?"

"You got so much you could sacrifice," Agnes explained. "It would make an awful big fire! Oh——" Suddenly Agnes forgot her ragged dress, her broken shoes, her snagged locks, forgot everything but the great opportunity. "Oh, ma'am, tell me!—Where *is* the water of life and what *must* I believe?"

"What water of life?" she asked blankly.

Agnes was keenly disappointed. "Then God isn't your friend!" she sighed. She rose and picked up the empty basket. "Nobody can tell me. The boy that cut off my hair hadn't never heard of it, and when I asked Winsie it made her mad, and Alley Jim said he hadn't learnt from the man that stands in with God, but's a-going to, but I can't find Alley Jim, and papa said he'd kill me if ever I ast him again."

The mistress, with her sensitive, refined face propped on her long slim hand gazed intently into the child's eloquent face, and something in the dark

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

eyes made her suddenly catch her breath. “Sit down, little girl, and tell me all you know about—God——” she hesitated at the word.

“Yes, I’ll tell you,” Agnes offered with bright eagerness. “I’ll tell you ever’thing I know and ’f I lived here, you’n me could find out the rest together, couldn’t we! Well, then, at first there was just God, but he needed some dust to make a man of, so he made the earth, that’s what the earth was for, Winsie says. When the man got asleep, God took his rib out of him and made a woman. Women is weaker than men, so God started something to growing before he made *her*, and wouldn’t it of been awful if He’d stopped with the man! Her come late in the day and was called Eve. But the man wasn’t named Morn. Adam, ma’am; Winsie told me.

“And God put ’em in a garden where there wasn’t any weeds, and give ’em ever’thing but one tree not to eat off of. So, of course, they went for that tree. But when God knew it, *He didn’t kill ’em!* Why, He made the stars and the lions—everything big and strong; but He didn’t kill ’em. It was because He loved ’em because He’d made ’em. He loves me because He made me. So I’m His friend. I give Him what I had. Alley Jim says He’s got the water of life for me, but I can’t find it, I don’t even know which way to look, ’cause you’ve got to believe something first and I don’t know what to believe. ’F I knew, I would. Wouldn’t you?”

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

“Poor child,” said the lady compassionately, “you do not understand, and I can’t explain it for little girls. But God is everywhere—there isn’t anything at all but His presence, no evil but evil thoughts, and that fable about the garden . . . it——” She broke off helplessly. “When you are older, you will not think of Goodness as a person. That is all I can say. When do you have to go home?”

“Not till night. But if I don’t get my basket full——”

“I’ll send you home at night with your basket filled if you’ll spend the day with me.”

If!—And all the time the lady, whose name was Miss Jocelyn, was giving Agnes her first adventure in a bathtub (“How is the water warm?” Agnes wondered), and all the while she was dressing her in new clothes, brought in hot haste from the shops, Miss Jocelyn was mellowing to smiles, even to laughter. What a different little Agnes it was who, in the afternoon, wandered about the spacious apartments with her arm about Miss Jocelyn and with Miss Jocelyn’s arm about her! And to Agnes, what a wonderful day! (“My old clothes always went the way I did,” she tried to explain, “but I got to go the way these new ’uns do.”) And what a different Miss Jocelyn from the lonely lady of the morning—to her, also, what a wonderful day that saw melancholy musings over the past driven away like mists before the radiance of a present happiness.

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

Most wonderful of all, to Miss Jocelyn it was, that though about to sail for Europe with no regrets because bitter wrongs had taught her to repel so-called friends, she thought of this waif's return to Shady Court with a pang. What was there about the small creature to stir her chilled heart?—the purity and faith of the big dark eyes? She found herself intensely interested in this ambassadress from the Bad Lands, though never before curious concerning the "slums."

"What is it about you?" she asked, once, with rare playfulness. "I thought I'd never care for people again."

Agnes nestled to her side. "Wouldn't you be getting married?"

Miss Jocelyn smoothed her adoring head and answered as if the question were altogether natural. "He went where I couldn't follow."

"Was it such a hard, *hard* way? Cold and hungry?"

"Yes, dear; terribly hard." She sighed deeply.

"What made him ask you to follow him such a hard way?"

"That is what I asked *him*," Miss Jocelyn cried out with such a flash in her eyes that Agnes was almost afraid.

"Well," Agnes spoke with regret, "and so you staid here. And it *is* awful lovely here; lovelier than a saloon."

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

After that, she was shown a collection of shells. “They came out of the great sea.” And as Agnes looked puzzled, the mistress explained, “You look everywhere and there is nothing but water—water.”

Agnes nodded, “A big wash day, I guess.”

Then Miss Jocelyn explained, and Agnes listened to the sound, a big shell held close against her ear, and the other, noting her interest, murmured as to herself: “He told me they would always speak of him; it was he who brought them to me; he said it would be his voice reminding me of his love.”

“God’s voice?”

“No, no, strange little spirit!—the voice of the man I loved.”

“But *you* didn’t love *him*, you know.” Agnes opened her eyes wide.

“Why do you say that?”

“*Huh!*” Agnes smiled. “What if *you* went a hard, *hard* way and ast *me* to follow. Wouldn’t I follow? My, wouldn’t I! Because I love you, Miss Jocelyn. You just tell me to follow and see if I don’t!” She laughed.

A few hours earlier Miss Jocelyn would not have believed a child could embarrass her; but now she turned abruptly to the piano and began to sing. It wasn’t at all like the lively music of the saloon, and Agnes didn’t know whether it was good or not; but it was good not to have to dance on a table while it was going on, so she sat very still, looking at the

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

singer, marveling that a human being could be so different from Winsie and yet so altogether fascinating.

When she finished, Agnes said, unexpectedly, "Is God in the room when He sees me without a bite to eat, Miss Jocelyn?"

"Everywhere—all space"—she waved her arm vaguely—"all is God."

"Then I got to find out what to believe. 'Cause I want Him to be my friend. If He's right by my bed when I'm rubbing and rubbing my feet for fear they'll freeze, He ain't friendly, is He?"

"I used to know a song about Him," Miss Jocelyn turned hastily to the piano, and without a pause she began to sing:

"Nearer, my God, to Thee,
Nearer to Thee——"

"Oh, Miss Jocelyn!" Agnes cried out, slipping from her chair and coming excitedly to the piano.
"*That's* what I mean."

"E'en though it be a cross
That raiseth me."

"But what is a cross?"

Miss Jocelyn hesitated, unaccountably thrilled by the other's eerie excitement. "My dear, they used

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

to think—when I was your age—that you came to God through suffering. But we know, now, that evil——”

“Hungry?” asked Agnes. “Not enough covers on the bed?”

“Ye-es, certainly.”

“I must be a long way on the road then,” Agnes said, with satisfaction. “But ain’t there any more?”

Miss Jocelyn found singing less difficult than the conversation.

“Still all my song shall be
Nearer, my God, to Thee,
Nearer, my God, to Thee,
Nearer to Thee.”

“Oh, Miss Jocelyn, sing it a thousand times, just that. ‘All my song’ will be nearer—nearer—nearer. . . . How near *can* we get?” Miss Jocelyn slipped her arm about the throbbing form. “*This* near?” panted Agnes. “When you was singing I didn’t seem so far off. Sing some more.”

“But what do you mean, child? *Why* do you want to get so close to—to your idea of God?”

“Because I love Him so.”

“How you say that! And yet one can’t have this personal nearness with a—a mere abstraction—universal Goodness. . . .” She roused herself, and questioned almost resentfully, “*Why* do you love Him?”

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

“Because He made me, and I like to be made. And because He made the stars. And because He has some water of life for me—and if I live I’m going to find out what to believe. Maybe Alley Jim has it by this time; if I can just find Alley Jim! I guess Mr. Philip Brown will learn him what it is.”

“Who?” cried Miss Jocelyn, with a violent start.

“Mr. Philip Brown. He’s the man that stands in with God. He’s rich, and has houses and *everything*, but he lives right there in the Bad Lands, so he can be close to poor people that don’t know about the water of life. Alley Jim says the name of the man that stands in with God is the easiest name to his ears he ever knew. *Does* sound soft, don’t it? *Philip Brown*, like that!”

She rose and shut the piano, a gray mask settling upon her sensitive face, and it was to Agnes as if the dearest, sweetest lady in the world had passed out the door to make room for the Queen of Sheba. The Queen of Sheba knew Philip Brown; she knew all about his carrying the news of the water of life to the Bad Lands. That was the hard, *hard* way she could not follow. She stood with every nerve tense, lips like marble.

Agnes murmured musingly, “Philip Brown—the man that stands in with God—*Philip*. . . . Sounds good to me!”

VI

THE FIRE DANCE

WHEN, at a late hour, Agnes' basket was filled, the tall, pale lady went with her even to the servants' door. "You must come back to-morrow and spend the whole day with me," she declared, "for the next day I'm to sail for Europe—on the ocean, you know, that's bigger than any wash day." Miss Jocelyn laughed aloud from sheer delight in the other's quaint speech and ways, and the laughter sounded as sweetly musical as the ringing of icicles upon the paved square of Shady Court.

Agnes, in the breath of that delicious laughter, glowed like a coal in a breeze, but she sighed, too, for all the Best People of her world went away after showing what a different world it would be if they stayed—there was Alley Jim; here was Miss Jocelyn. Anyway, one golden day lay on the other side of a freezing night; she would fasten her eyes upon its splendor, not try to look around it.

"I'll have a great surprise for you," Miss Jocelyn smiled tenderly. "The greatest surprise you can possibly imagine——" And, although the wind

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

swept the street, she stood in the doorway, her hand on the child's shoulder. "But you might try to guess. Come, little spirit, what would you like best of all?"

That was easy. "Just to be with you," said Agnes, simply.

As she passed the deserted lot, and saw the altar from which her hair had gone up in a blaze, Agnes smiled happily. What a funny little ragged girl that was, sitting on the ground with the Jew, listening in bewilderment to his suggestion that the water of life might have been the water poured on the altars of Baal! *She* did not seem Agnes at all. For the sights of Solomon's Temple had somehow ennobled her, to say nothing of the all-over bath and the new clothes. And something had happened that made her feel she never could go back. . . . Miss Jocelyn had kissed her.

She might never go back to the old Agnes, but on nearing home she found with something like dismay, that it was the same old "Tenderloin." In the murky crookedness of filthy alleys keenest impressions of Miss Jocelyn's splendid rooms were drained away, leaving her memory almost dry. And when the pungent odors of soap-making bit her nostrils, she bowed over her basket like a little old woman. The sordid saloons on the ground-floors of tenements poured forth the *whang-tink, whang-tink* of pianos like clattering tins. Upstairs in her cold room—*ugh!* so cold—it was as if she had not been

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

kissed by the Queen. Just as she was, she crawled under the covers, for if you have a dress you must wear it day and night during the February storms of the Bad Lands.

When Mr. Earle came home he cursed because his daughter was not up waiting for him and because there was no warmth and because he stumbled over something that did not belong in the denuded room. Almost sober, because without money, and half-frantic for drink, he would have had Agnes out of bed by her arm or foot, if the lighted lamp had not revealed a well-filled basket. There was so much to eat and of such excellent quality that he decided first to have a feast, then spend the money found in the bottom of the basket at his favorite saloon, drinking like a king. First, he rushed away to buy coal, and when the stove was roaring and the damper jumping a witch-dance, he ate ravenously.

As he ate, he kept before his mind the picture of the gilded saloon, tasting in fancy the strongest whisky, listening as if to catch the clink of brimming glasses. Once he rose from the floor to hurry thither, gripping Miss Jocelyn's money in his quivering hand, but no—he would hold himself in leash as long as possible to enjoy to the full the exquisite, sensuous delight of burning away his thirst with nectar of fire.

Suddenly there flashed upon his mind—possibly from eating food unlike any found in the Bad Lands

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

—a scene from his past, then another—another, till he began growling curses over his meat. That was the devil of being sober—of ever being sober—one got to thinking, thinking of the old days; better keep sodden with drink from year's end to year's end, better die in the ravings of madness, than see clearly. He started up savagely, kicking away the basket, clutching the money convulsively.

The noise made Agnes stir, but did not wake her. She murmured drowsily, “Nearer—nearer—nearer . . .”

He halted, looked down. “Poor little devil,” he muttered. “Tough life—but she has her dreams. Oh, it's the Bad Lands for me and Aggie. Well!—I'm going to get on the biggest spree of my life.” He started away.

The voice grew more distinct. “Nearer—nearer—nearer my God— All my song will be just nearer—nearer—yes, like *this*.” There came a bar of rippling laughter.

He pounced upon her, dragging her to a sitting posture, his furious oaths drowning her scream of terror.

“Didn't I tell you if you ever mentioned God again I'd kill you?” He glared at her with insane rage.

“Papa, papa, you're choking me—oh, papa!”

“Ever going to say that word again? You know what word. You wasn't so sound asleep you don't

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

know. It's because you're always thinking of it and hounding me with it after my warning. You ever going to say it again as long as you live, to me or to anybody else? Answer me, you little devil, speak up. You know the word—it's God, curse you! Are you ever going to even think of Him again?”

“Don't kill me, papa,” she wailed.

“I don't know what I'll do. I'm crazy, I guess. Ever going to think of Him again?—be quick.”

“But He made me,” Agnes sobbed. “When I think of me, I think of Him—because He loved me enough to do it and I love Him because He did.”

“Devils in hell!” cried Mr. Earle in a loud voice, leaping away. With no definite purpose, frantic for need of whisky, and obsessed by the idea that she was defying him, he dashed at the stove, flung open the door, thrust the shovel deep into the bed of coals. “I'll burn the thought of Him out of your brain!” he snarled, his shaking hand making it hard to gather up the fire on the shovel. “Get up. Oh—you're dressed mighty fine, aren't you. Well, just take off those shoes and stockings, for I want your bare feet on the floor. You think you're a great lady, greater than your father, since I've let you off from dancing the Dance of the Wine Glasses. Well, now you're going to dance the fire dance and if you don't pick up your feet mighty lively, I'll just drop a red-hot coal on 'em. Pull 'em off quicker'n that, I'm in a hurry to be gone.”

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

“Papa!——”

“You’ve got one chance, Aggie, just one, before the ball commences.” He still shuffled the coals on the shovel, looking back at her like a maniac from over his shoulder, his hair matted on his forehead. “Will you promise me to forget about God? Eh? What?”

Saying nothing, she began taking off her shoes and stockings, her face deathly pale, but her thin hands steady.

“Eh? What? You want to dance the fire dance after all, do you?”

Agnes whispered, “It’s my sacrifice.”

The man’s voice rose to a shriek. “Yes, I’ve got to burn it out of you, I’ve got to burn it out of your brain. . . .” He tried to reach the poker to draw up a full shovelful of coals, but it was a little out of his reach. He threw forward a leg to draw it toward him with his foot, and in so doing, unconsciously pushed forward with the hand that gripped the shovel-handle. The edge of the blade was jammed against the back of the stove; trying to lessen the impact, he slipped and fell, and all his weight came upon the shovel.

The next moment there was an unearthly scream, a flash of fire, a crash that jarred the floor—and horrified faces gaping at the doorway.

VII

THE QUEEN'S RIVAL

EVERYTHING was so sudden and so strange—the stovepipe falling forward like a long black arm and striking Agnes upon the head—that men and women were pouring into the room before she realized what had happened. The air was stifling with acrid smoke, through which showed a crimson glow, while above the frantic ejaculations of the tenants and the sharp orders of the janitor rose those nerve-wracking screams no less blood-chilling because they grew fainter and fainter.

A hand grasped Agnes' arm. "You come with me." It was Winsie, and the child without hesitation followed her to the room which, before her day with Miss Jocelyn, she had thought beautiful.

"Oh, what was it, what was it?" Agnes kept saying in shrill fear. "What *was* it?"

"He turned the stove over . . . on his head."

"Is he killed, Winsie? Is he dead?"

"Lay there till I find out——" And Winsie lifted her in gentle arms and placed her upon the bed. Agnes sobbed from nervous excitement, from sheer

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

inability to comprehend. The swarming tenants pounded up and down stairs, the floor jarred, there were hoarse shouts and treble screams. Doors banged. A rush of heavy feet swept by, steady, definite, an organized noise in the midst of chaos.

But when Agnes opened her eyes there was perfect quiet, so far as perfection goes in the Bad Lands, and it was morning; so she looked for the rain-picture on the plastering of the man crawling out of the gutter—he had crawled away at last! But no, the room was different . . . and, oh, yes! there stood Winsie in a white nightdress, kindling the fire, her beautiful hair all about her shoulders. And she, too, was in a white nightdress, much too big for her, and the pretty dress given her by Miss Jocelyn was neatly folded upon a chair—how strange to have one's dress folded upon a chair, instead of upon one's body!

“Did you undress me, Winsie?”

“Yes, dear——” The answer was soft and sweet, as if Winsie had grown to love the little girl in spite of herself. Over the coal the flame danced a-tiptoe, as if unwilling to fasten itself down to mundane existence. Winsie, looking at it fixedly, cried in command, “You burn!” The fire burned. When she had crept back in bed to borrow from her own warmth, she took the child in her arms and told how the ambulance had carried away Mr. Earle, and how

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

they said at the station that he might live, but would never see——

"*Blind?*" Agnes whispered.

Then Winsie, to divert her thoughts, asked about the nice clothes, and pretty soon Agnes was telling everything concerning Miss Jocelyn and the Temple of Solomon. As she dwelt on the spacious rooms filled with furnishings for dozens of Golden Gleams, and told how the Queen had everything she wanted and a great deal more, Winsie grew bitter.

"That rich woman in her palace!" cried Winsie, taking away her arms. "I guess when she thinks of us, freezing and starving, it makes her warm and good. Well, please excuse *me!*" She began to dress. "What does she want of you to-day?"

"She's got a 'sprise for me, I don't know what, but it'll be good, 'cause she knows how I love her, oh, just like this." And Agnes sat up in bed and stretched out her arms and drew them slowly in as if they were filled not with air but with Miss Jocelyn.

"*Huh!* You love her better'n anybody, I guess?"

"Oh, *yes!*"

Suddenly Winsie knew what it had meant for her, seeing little Agnes year after year, growing up strange and white of soul in the midst of evil, a flower in a cellar, unnaturally pale, of course, but still a flower.

"*Huh!*" Winsie scoffed. "I guess she talked to you about God till you couldn't rest. Those kind

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

in their silks and satins think they know all about heaven. They think they can go out and buy one of their own."

"She didn't know about the water of life——" Agnes shook her head regretfully. "The fire feels good, don't it!"

Winsie had never looked to Agnes so pretty as now, standing before the glass, combing back her hair, the rosy firelight on her white robe and bare feet. She was a wonderful Winsie, no doubt of that, nobody else had those curves and that plump softness.

"If I ever get a woman," said Agnes, "I want to be like you!"

Winsie turned and looked at the little figure huddled in the middle of the bed, her dark hair forming a cloud for the light of her face to shine against; and her mind went back—it never did if she could help it—to the time when she was a little girl not unlike Agnes.

"Look here, Aggie, I'm going to keep you for good, and that rich, proud woman ain't going to take you away. There's mighty little good in my life, and now't your father's out of the race, you just live with me. Won't you? And I'll teach you what I know. Did that rich woman show you how to pray?"

"What is to pray, Winsie?"

"Oh! Well, I'll just frustrate old Miss Fifth Ave-

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

nue. I'll teach you what you won't ever forget, and that's how to talk to God. Why, I used to, myself! He'll hear you, too. But you've got to know how. You can't stand up and talk to Him like He was a man, for he ain't there to meet your eye. You've got to get down on your knees, and shut your eyes and then just go ahead.”

Agnes was out of bed, her cheeks burning with excitement. “Come on!” she cried—“show me how.”

Winsie crossed the room and hovered over the kneeling figure. “Call Him your Father.”

Agnes looked up and shook her head. “He wouldn't like that; fathers ain't like a star-maker. Fathers is always trying to catch you or make you do what you hate. And getting drunk. I got to call him something nice or not at all. I guess God'll do. You get down here, Winsie, and show me how.”

Then Winsie knelt beside Agnes and closed her eyes and said, “O God——”

“Go on!”

But Winsie couldn't go on. After keeping very still, she said in a queer voice, “And then you just tell Him anything you want to, and at the end say ‘Amen,’ and get up, and it's over.”

“Please do one, Winsie, please do one for me!”

After a longer pause, Winsie said softly, “O God, if it ain't wrong, let me keep this little white angel in my life, but don't let her go the wrong way that never turns back. Amen.”

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

"What is 'Amen,' Winsie?"

Winsie meditated. "You know what an echo is, don't you? Well, when you pray a sure-enough prayer, there's a sort of echo in your heart for every word. So when you've said all you want to, your heart says 'Amen.' And you say it for your heart. It's an echo."

"It was like an echo in my heart when you was praying, Winsie. Ought I to say 'Amen'?"

"Say it, Aggie."

"Amen!" said Agnes, her voice clear and happy.

VIII

SECRETS AND SWEET POTATOES

WHEN Winsie announced that she would take Agnes to the "station," the child entertained no delusions about speeding over gleaming rails to the country where grass grows wild, for in the Bad Lands, the "station" means one of those immaculately white buildings with green lanterns in front of them at night, where more policemen are to be seen than anywhere except in parades. First she imitated Winsie's example and bathed and combed her hair. ("Miss Jocelyn made me so nice it's easier to keep me this way than to get back again 'f I ever let myself go," she apologized.)

"Not used to much water, are you, honey?" smiled Winsie, noting the splashings.

"Carried it lots, but kept it off myself, mostly," Agnes said. She was immensely proud to be seen walking beside Winsie through Shady Court, Winsie all in red, even to her shoes and stockings—good thing Miss Jocelyn had given her pretty clothes, or she wouldn't have been half good enough—that made her remember that this day was to be spent with the

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

Queen of Sheba, who on the morrow would sail away on the ocean that was bigger than any wash day. Her heart sang with joy: what wonders to be crowded into one day!—this walk with Winsie, the hours to be spent with the lady who knew how to sing about God—and her father in a hospital! Maybe Winsie's prayer had done it, Agnes didn't know.

At the police station, Winsie seemed much at home. She asked exactly what she pleased, and wasn't afraid of anybody. Yes, Mr. Earle was in a decidedly bad way, but no worse than he deserved, that was his kid, eh? Huh! What a pity. Somebody handed Agnes a dime, and patted her head. When they were on their way from the station to the hospital, Agnes said, admiringly, "You know lots of p'licemen, don't you, Winsie!"

Winsie answered with a shrug, "I wasn't born yesterday."

Agnes, who could have said more than that of herself, was pondering this saying, when suddenly whom should she see coming straight toward them but Alley Jim, looking just as he did in his cellar except that the rosy firelight was not upon his strong face! He was glad to meet the little girl once more, but for some reason that a little girl couldn't understand, he was terribly unkind to Winsie, so unkind that Agnes' joy all melted away. She had thought many and many a time of how it would be when she saw once more the man who knew about God, but

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

had never dreamed of him with a dark frown on his face and accusing words on his scornful lips.

Another strange thing was that Winsie, who could quarrel as bitterly as anybody, yes, and could even fight for all she looked so round and soft—Winsie seemed to resent nothing that was said, just bowed her face of peach-blossom and cream, and shuddered a little away from Agnes, and presently stood still, a drooping crimson flower against the background of a splotched soot-stained wall.

"I know I ain't worthy, Jim," Winsie said with a choke in her voice, "but, oh! I get so lonesome, and I want something different to live close to."

"And what would *she* be living close to?" Jim cried out, fiercely. "Do you want her to be what you are? She couldn't help be. *You* couldn't keep her from it."

"I guess you're right. . . . Then I'll go away some day and it'll be the river for me."

"Well," cried Jim, "it'll not be the river for her, if I can help it."

Agnes had never felt so dreadful as when they left Winsie shuddering against the wall. Jim was going to take her to the hospital; and that night he would come to carry her away from Shady Court to the protection of Mr. Philip Brown——

"But, oh, Alley Jim! How you talked to my Winsie!—you know God made her same's me."

"Yes, but she's finished, and you're not," he de-

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

clared, his face as fixed as an iron mask. Maybe the best things are those you haven't had yet; Jim was a disappointment, but Miss Jocelyn remained in the future of this day, and here was the hospital with its rows of white iron beds and a great white bundle which the nurse said was Mr. Earle. He might have been anybody, he was so swathed in cloths, just a little opening left for him to breathe. Agnes was ordered to sit in a chair until the city physician came to the ward, so Jim went away, again promising to "show up" at Old Shady about dark. "We'll take care of you," he declared with relentless cheerfulness, just as if he had not made Winsie cry out like a wounded animal. Agnes did not want to be taken care of, but she felt that she must be, so said nothing.

She sat there a long time while the doctor's assistant bent over bed after bed, putting his ear close to recumbent forms as if to ascertain if the works had run down, sometimes lowering a glass tube into open mouths as they take the river's soundings, then murmuring the depth, or something, to a recording nurse. From different parts of the ward cries would ring out, or groans, or deep shuddering curses, and it was all so interesting, so new, that Agnes lost the ache in her heart for Winsie, and her hurt feeling over Alley Jim, just as if she had turned them over on an old page out of sight, knowing she could find them again whenever she wanted to.

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

Suddenly the great cloth package that the nurse said was Mr. Earle stirred, and then from that bed rose shriek after shriek, while feet hurried thither, and other patients, roused to renewed complaints, added to the confusion. Here came the city physician, for once in a hurry, and after remedies had been swiftly applied, his attention was directed to the slight figure in the chair.

"Daughter, eh? Aggie? You're the one he keeps calling for. He wants to tell you something, so be on hand, for he'll never quiet down till he gets to tell it."

Agnes stayed and stayed . . . and after a while everything was uninteresting. What would Miss Jocelyn think of her not coming? The chair was as hard as a stone step. One blessing—the room was warm. She missed the noises of Old Shady, she hadn't thought it could be so still anywhere while the sun was shining. It might have been pleasant watching the shadows slip along the wall but for the smell—not like a soap-factory, not like anything people live close to.

About two o'clock, after Mr. Earle had been quieted from one of his agonizing periods, Agnes was told she might go for something to eat. "But don't be gone longer than twenty minutes," she was warned, "for you must be here when your father comes to himself."

Suddenly Agnes knew that she was very hungry.

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

What if the policeman hadn't given her a dime? She sped away, bowing her head as it encountered the strong north wind, and after a swallow flight down side streets, came to Movetski's, where men and women sit in stalls with their feet in straw, or crouch beside pushcarts crying their wares. With practiced eye, Agnes soon found a Russian Jew presiding over a small oven on wheels. When he saw her dime he wanted all of it, but she knew better than that, and just laughed at the idea. So for a nickel she was given two sweet potatoes and enough of something called "Butter" to go as far as the very last bite. Not only this: room was made for her to spread her feast upon an inverted barrel, and a slip of tin was furnished as a butterknife—and the vender regarded her with smiling benevolence because she had proved by her close bargaining that she was one of them.

"Oh, yes, Aggie Earle!" cried a girl's taunting voice close behind her, "think you're mighty smart in your fine clothes and your sweet potatoes, don't ye?"

Agnes wheeled about—holding her hand, however, over her dinner, lest it be snatched away—and stared at a girl of about twelve, with yellow complexion, bony frame, who was wretchedly though rather neatly dressed.

It was Jenny Tildy, who lived with her invalid mother, at the top of Agnes' tenement. Agnes said, boastingly, "*My* papa's in a horsepital."

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

"And I don't care *if-he-is!*" retorted Jenny Tildy, in a very bad humor. "I know something about you that's going to put an end to all *your* fine airs, missy!"

"Why ain't you in the factory?" Agnes inquired, too diplomatic to ask directly after this mysterious knowledge. "I thought you was *always* in the factory."

"Inspector's making his rounds—us that ain't fourteen has got to scoot and hide, t'foreman said. And me losing all this afternoon's wages! And my pore ma suffering for high-grade medicines and pills!"

"Want one of my 'taters?" Agnes asked, not much impressed by the "suffering ma," but feeling her way to the other's secret.

What a foolish question! Without answering, Jenny Tildy broke open the second potato, and ducked her head at the "Butter." "Fork over some of that there scrapings," she ordered.

"Want to borrow of my tin?" Agnes proffered.

"Got ten fingers, ain't I?" Jenny Tildy reasoned. "I'd go back to the horsepital with you, only they wouldn't let me in. Say! I got a big thing on you. Listen at me! Don't you go home to-night unless you want awful trouble."

"I ain't afraid of nothing. Alley Jim is coming for me, and he was head of the gang. Alley Jim, he ain't never been downed."

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

“Peugh! He couldn’t stand up half a minute agin’ what’s coming after you. I tell you the rowdies is going to git you. Say, chicken, they ain’t but one safe place for you on earth, and that’s in my room. Your step-ma come after you to-day, and when she heard of the horsepital, she laid her plans. She wants you. Say, you meet me in front of the Scroggs Saloon at six o’clock, and I’ll see you through. I guess that’ll be worth one sweet per-tater.”

IX

THE WARNING

AGNES had no intention of meeting Jenny Tildy in front of Bob Scroggs' Saloon at six o'clock, but she did not hurt her feelings by refusing directly. As she went back alone to the hospital, she laughed at the thought of any number of rowdies overpowering Alley Jim. How could her step-mother harm her when the former champion of the East Side gang was on her side? At the grim portal of the hospital, she paused, hoping some one who knew her might be watching since here was a distinct rise in life—but no, not a soul in sight! Thus at the moment of greatest triumph, man is often alone. She went to her father's ward, and as she had put away her disappointment over losing the day with Miss Jocelyn, and her sympathy for poor, crushed Winsie, so now she turned down the Jenny Tildy page with that imaginary danger of Mrs. Earle—otherwise Cindy Bidds. She resumed her seat on the hard chair, and lived nothing but hospital life—staring at the white ceiling, and white beds, the nurses, in their white uniforms, till her

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

little head dropped forward and she fell into a white dream.

Suddenly the white dream turned black, and she was in the midst of a nightmare of showering fire and falling stovepipes and agonized shrieks, and these shrieks pursued her out into the sharp-lined country of Wide-Awake. Then, while the blurs of the dream-country were still in her eyes, the nurse clutched her arm and hurried her to her father's bed, and the physician who had come out of the stovepipe with a hypodermic needle in his hand tried to quiet the patient who refused to be quieted.

"I've got to see her," Mr. Earle kept repeating hoarsely, shrilly, in all the keys of intense suffering, even to the whisper of exhaustion.

"Take his hand," the nurse ordered Agnes. "Tell him who you are. You've got to put your mouth close to his head—now: as loud as you can."

"Papa?" cried Agnes, bending over the bandaged face, and lifting, with a sense of strangeness, his heavy hand which had so often struck her. "This is me."

"I've got to see her," screamed the sufferer. "My God, I've got to see her!"

The physician said roughly, "Speak up louder. Tell him your name." He did not speak roughly from hardness of heart, but in order to spur her on.

"Papa, I'm here—I'm Aggie, I'm Aggie, papa—I'm Aggie of the Bad Lands."

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

He heard, and his heavy hand suddenly closed on hers. "Aggie! Can you hear me? Don't go with her—your stepmother. *Don't go*. Can you hear?"

"Yes, I hear, papa—I'm Aggie, I'm Aggie, Aggie of Old Shady."

"Are you going with her?"

"I won't go with her, papa, never in the world I won't."

"She'll make you, if you don't hide—listen, Aggie. My God, Aggie, listen!—can you hear? I sold you to her . . . to-day—yesterday—when was it? . . . I sold you to her for whisky. Don't you let her take you away. Swear it."

"Hope I may die!" cried Agnes, in terror.

Then Mr. Earle shrieked out, "Doctor! doctor! doctor!" The doctor used the hypodermic needle. Then he said, looking at Agnes queerly, his hand on her shoulder, "You can go now, child—he won't need you any more; he's relieved his conscience, and we'll keep him asleep."

X

AGNES' LOVE LETTER

WHEN Agnes was dismissed from the hospital, it was half-past five; and because her father's words and manner had impressed her with the sense of some vague but terrible danger, she decided to go to Scroggs' Saloon, after all, to meet Jenny Tildy.

"Good thing," said the sallow, thin, long-legged and sharp-chinned Jenny Tildy, greeting her from the pavement before she reached the door. "Where's your Alley Jim, now? Huh? Why, the boys jumped him in a blind alley, and tromped on 'im, and beat 'im up, and left him for dead. Much good he'd do *you*, missy. With two black eyes and one broke leg and his arm in splints, laying on 'is back in the very horsepital your pa is took in! And as to Winsie, she's put out; told the jan'ter's wife wasn't never coming back alive, but might float back some day in the river. Why, you ain't got nobody but me, and all because of one sweet pertater. Pay as you go, that's my motter. Come on right behind me and don't do nothing unless you want to spend that

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

nickel on something to eat that I see you put back in your pocket in change.”

Agnes was wofully depressed on hearing about Alley Jim and Winsie, but she didn't cry, for if that sort of news made you cry, you could be in tears all your life in the Bad Lands; besides, here was a new friend—a great rarity. Agnes bought something good to eat, and so did Jenny Tildy, after which they pursued winding alleys and slipped along greasy walls till it was dark and the smoke from a soap factory came pouring down as if the court in which they found themselves were a great flue sucking it into the earth. Lounging men coughed and swore, and at the windows women coughed and conversed with people in other houses without needing telephones, and children coughed and struggled and toiled under the burden of heavy water-buckets—for they were in Shady Court. But because they had come in by a cellar-way, and darted up the stairs like lizards, nobody knew they were.

On the highest floor, at the end of a soapy-smelling dark corridor was a little door whose top was cut off by a ladder running up to the trapdoor in the roof. Jenny Tildy humped over to keep from striking her head, and even Agnes ducked down, and then they were in a room under the eaves whose ceiling slanted quite down to the floor, but in which a narrow passageway was built out to a tiny dormer window.

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

On the only spot where a bed could have found room, stood the bed, and upon this bed lay a motionless form, its back to the girls.

"Don't pay no 'tention to ma," said Jenny Tildy, lighting the fire in one of the smallest stoves that ever curved its tail of a stovepipe aloft. "She's deaf and dumb and blind, has rheumatiz and ketching diseases, and is otherwise out of the fight. Ack just as if she wasn't here, for in sperrit she ain't. Tell me about the horsepital, I see you're dying to, an' then I'll 'splain the big secret and we'll eat and go to bed. Set on the floor, for in here stand you can't; but you got all outdoors to do your standing in, and a little setting won't hurt nobody."

Agnes looked at Jenny Tildy's mother doubtfully, but as she never stirred, the hospital story was related in all its details. Then the girls, sitting on the floor, divided their provisions and ate with the restraint that makes much of every bite.

"Won't *she* be hungry?" Agnes nodded toward the bed.

"I ain't ast her—let 'er sleep it off, if she is. Now for that there big secret—you listen at me. Your step-ma came here this morning with three of the beefiest men ever I see—same that beat up pore Alley Jim, later; was looking for you—yes, and they'll be here to-night, but won't never think of coming to *my* room."

"But what does she want with me, Jenny Tildy?"

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

—that’s what I don’t see. When she lived here she never had no use for me.”

“Let me tell you; they is fine-dressed women that has houses where they shuts up girls and makes slaves of ’em and *never* lets ’em go, but makes ’em do whatever they say. Well, these fine-dressed ladies, they pays good prices to get young girls that’s pretty like you—and like I ain’t, thank God! So when Cindy Bidds goes away, she makes a dicker with one of them fine-dressed ladies and they are going to take you there and shut you up for keeps and have you for their slave. Why, the very same thing would become of me, if I hadn’t no ma. Good thing I got a ma, ain’t it?” She laughed.

Agnes, her big eyes wide, her face pale to the lips, looked first at her new-found friend, then at the motionless form on the bed.

“Look a-here,” cried Jenny Tildy, rising with humped-up shoulders, to keep from striking her head against the ceiling. She went to the bed, drew back her fist and gave the figure a hearty cuff that came as a smashing blow at Agnes’ ideas of propriety. “Now looky!” Raising her thin leg—still cautiously, because of the ceiling—she administered to the unresisting form a hearty kick. “What d’ye think of *that*, uh?” Agnes said in an awed undertone, “She’s mighty uncomplaining!” In her experience with maternity, blows and kicks had always come from the other side, and this seemed like retri-

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

butive justice. 'G'on!" she whispered, intensely interested. "See if she won't do *nothing*."

Jenny Tildy, with a laugh, jerked the bedclothes upon the floor and waved her arm by way of introduction: "This is my ma—old Mrs. Vanderbilt."

"Why! it ain't nothing but hay!" ejaculated Agnes, shrinking back from the dummy. "Oh, oh! I wisht my step-ma wasn't nothing but hay."

"You'd better wish it. Lemme tell you. My ma—the flesh-and-blood un—she just naturally went off one day and never showed up ag'in. There ain't nothing for kids in the Bad Lands. If their pas and mas are a-living they is beat and slaved from morning to night, an' if they is dead, the gang's always a-watching for 'em to kerry 'em off where they ain't never heard of ag'in. And nobody don't keer if they ain't, there's too many of 'em, that's how folks feels. I've wisht a thousand times I wasn't never born, but that's one thing you can't go back of and git behind—being born is. So when I seen ma was gone for keeps, I makes me a hay-ma——"

"And I wisht I had one," Agnes sighed.

"I bet! Why I kin keep this room's long's I please. Ever' morning I locks up ma, an' at night I pretends to bring her grub—nobody never asts how's her rheumatiz—nobody don't keer. Did *you* ever know a ma that couldn't yank you by the hair and slap you and kick you downstairs, and send you after a bucket o' water in freezing weather?"

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

"No, *sir!* It's the only kind to have, yours is."

"Maybe Mrs. Vanderbill would adopt you if you *was* good," grinned Jenny Tildy. "Well, it's me for bed—hello! La!"—in drawing off her stockings two scraps of paper fell out—"I *thought* something was scratching me occasional, but I'd forgot I put 'em there this morning."

"What are they?" Agnes forgot the hay-ma in this new interest.

"Reading. They was blowing down the street and I grabbed 'em and stowed 'em away for my night's reading. I wanter keep in practice, and I ain't got no extensive liberry."

"I never could read," Agnes sighed.

"'Tain't nothing to do when you know how. Begin at the gutter and keep on the pavement, like, till you reach the next white crossing. I'll set the lamp on the floor—don't you kick it over—and show ye how. . . . Oh, I see; it's pieces of the Bible, the book that God wrote."

Agnes cried out in amazement, "What did you say?"

"Why, God made a book, you know, the Bible. Ever'body knows that."

"For us to read?"

"'Course it's for us to read. A person don't make a book just to read hisself."

"Maybe it tells about the water of life," Agnes cried, her cheeks burning.

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

Jenny Tildy frowned. "I don't know **nothing** about that. Before pa was killed in the fight he made me go to school, and there was reading and spelling and 'rithmetic, but we never got as far as God. Do you want to hear this reading or not, uh?"

"Oh, yes, yes, every word!" cried Agnes, clasping her hands. "Pieces of God's book! Couldn't I have 'em? Jenny Tildy, wouldn't you give 'em to me if I did whatever you told me to?"

"Why sure, *I* don't want 'em. I'm just **reading** to keep my hand in—the lines is tore, considerable, but words is words. Now you listen!"

8. He that loveth not, knoweth not God; ~~for~~
God is love.

9. In this was manifested
love toward us
that God sent His only
Son into the world
might live through

10. Herein is love
loved God
And send His Son

Jenny Tildy remarked in a business-like tone, "That there's Number One. Now for a new **read-
ing!**"

"But what does it mean about sending His **Son?**"

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

Agnes was greatly perplexed. “Who ~~was~~ His Son? What became of Him?”

“I reads and explains nothin’. I’m dead sleepy and it’s the factory for me early in the morning; and I don’t know, anyhow. Here goes!”

17. Herein is our love made
may have boldness
of judgment
we in this world.

18. There is no fear in love; but perfect love
casteth out fear.

“That’s all,” cried Jenny Tildy. “Good night!”

“It’s all love—love!” whispered Agnes to herself, pressing the torn bits of paper to her lips. “No fear—oh, ‘there is *no* fear,’ He says. He says it Himself—He wrote it—God’s book! Jenny Tildy!” she cried out in sudden rapture, “I’m just too happy!”

“Better not be!” Jenny Tildy warned her as she blew out the light. “Something’ll happen, sure!”

“Nothing’ll happen!” Agnes exclaimed, slipping gleefully into bed after a superfluous kick at the hay-ma when climbing over the image on the floor. “I ain’t going to have no more fear. God says not to. He says love throws it out, and I got the love to throw it out with. Oh, Jenny Tildy! Just to think that I never knew there was any book that

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

God had made—and as soon as I heard of it, I got pieces of it—not one piece; *two* pieces! Two pieces of a book that He made What made the stars. . . . And made me—and a book for me—and made you my friend to read it because I couldn't. No, I ain't going to fear nothing. I believe I'll find Miss Jocelyn early in the morning and maybe her big surprise is to take me away with her across the ocean, and make me like she is."

"Well," said Jenny Tildy, skeptically, "I expect to be here to-morry night, if you ain't, so please let me have some sleep."

Agnes was in such a whirl of excitement that she thought she never could go to sleep, but in a few minutes she was breathing the deep and regular breath of innocent slumber. In the middle of the night she woke with a start to find something between her inner garment and her heart, then remembered the bits of paper which were to her childish imagination as bits of a letter God had written her in the Bad Lands, to tell her that He was love, all love—and that in love there is no fear.

XI

AGNES DISAPPEARS

IT was growing dark when Agnes cautiously crept along the blank side of a winding alley in the great city. If the factory girl who had given her shelter the preceding night was not at the entrance of Shady Court, waiting for her, what was to be done? The hospital where her father lay unconscious had turned her from its doors an hour ago, and the biting February wind warned her against a pile of straw on the floor of a deserted room. She had known of people being frozen to death in the Bad Lands for all the sun shone as brightly as ever the next morning, and that is why she was venturing to Shady Court before the hour appointed. If her stepmother had really sold her to a lady in fine clothes, who meant to make a slave of her, she would try to keep out of the way; but little girls mustn't freeze to death as long as there is the chance of a warm bed. Hope of seeing the factory-girl before the hour set, and fear of encountering her stepmother made her face look weirdly old—she was only seven, but it was a seven of the Bad Lands.

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

The winding alley led into a crooked street where saloons were already casting round balls of light among the wheels of pushcarts, and in this street a man spoke close to the girl's ear: "Why, hello there, Aggie! Say, do you know a fellow called Alley Jim? Well, he's been beat up, and can't come to Shady Court, so he sent me and Wiggles after you. He's got something nice to give you."

He was a burly man, with a coarse, red face, and although Agnes wanted very much to know what Alley Jim had for her, she instinctively shrank away. His companion—doubtless Wiggles—was also burly of form and red and coarse of face, and when he took her arm she wanted to scream, but was afraid.

"That'll be all right, Aggie," Wiggles assured her. "I guess you wouldn't let a sick man like Alley Jim worry himself to death to see you and give you nice things, and you not willing to help him."

She did not know whether to believe them or not, and all the time she was trying to decide they were hurrying her away as fast as her little legs could go.

"Alley Jim," said the first man to Wiggles, "he's a rum kiddo, ain't he! Used to be head of the gang, didn't he, Wiggles? Got a broke head on 'im now. Too bad. Says he can't die peaceful without seeing Aggie and giving her 'is blessing."

"That'll be all right, Aggie," Wiggles said again. "Alley Jim says you'll stand by 'im, he says."

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

“But I don’t want to go with you,” Agnes cried out in desperation. “And I don’t b’lieve you’re taking me to Alley Jim. Alley Jim is in the horsepital, and this ain’t no way to the horsepital.”

“Oh, yes, it is; and you hurry along faster, and keep your head closed, or we’ll run a knife into you—won’t we, Wiggles?”

“That’ll be all right, Aggie,” said Wiggles in a soothing tone, but with a look that froze her blood. “Our program is to take you along peaceable.”

“Yes, that’s the program,” agreed the other, “but if she makes a fuss the knife’ll be the chief actor. He’s right here behind the scenes,” and he exhibited a murderous-looking knife under his jacket.

“Don’t stick her with it!” Wiggles pleaded.

“I don’t want to, and I won’t if she’ll come alive. Alley Jim would be right discomposed if we kerried her to ’im on a shutter.”

“Good Lord!” Wiggles suddenly ejaculated, as in amazement. “Blast my eyes if here ain’t a cart backed right up agin’ the sidewalk, a man holding the hoss! Le’s git in and ride; what d’ye say, Aggie?”

“No, no—oh, *no!*” Agnes wildly expostulated, struggling with all her futile might. “I don’t want to go with you. I don’t *want* to go!”

“Yes, you do, too,” retorted Wiggles. “Little girls oughtn’t to be walking when hosses is standing around sp’iling to be drove, and a big husky kiddo

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

like this wasted on holding the beast when he might be putting you in. Oh, you won't git in, won't ye? Where's that knife?”

“Under my coat just now,” the other growled, “but it'll be in her heart if she makes any trouble.”

Agnes was lifted violently from the ground and thrown upon the floor of the cart. As there was no seat, the three men stood, thus effectually warding her off from the gaze of passersby. Feeling the wheels bounding over the uneven cobblestones, Agnes, shaken from head to foot, cried out in the thin voice of terror, but her cry did not reach the street. Once or twice she made an effort to struggle upward, only to be pushed mercilessly back upon the floor by a brutal foot.

After a long time the cart suddenly stopped, and, as strong arms snatched up the quivering child, she noted that it was dark save for a distant street-light. While being borne up the front steps of a gloomy three-story building, she rolled her eyes about despairingly, trying to recognize something familiar in the scene; but to her eyes, contracted by shrinking fear, all was strange.

One of the men gave a low whistle, and the grim door swung half open. There came the smell of close, damp air; a key rattled in the lock; the cart was swiftly driven away, and silence fell upon the brooding street with its one dim light.

At the entrance to Shady Court, Jenny Tildy,

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

the factory-girl, waited a long time to share with the waif the poor comforts of her attic room. Her waiting was all in vain, for Agnes of the Bad Lands had "disappeared."

XII

BEHIND PRISON WALLS

AT first too badly shaken from the cart to get a clear impression of strange surroundings, Agnes stared from the two men who had kidnapped her to the woman in fine clothes who was jingling a bunch of keys. Almost at once, thanks to the acid voice of the woman, the child was roused from her numbed terror to a definite perception of the downstairs hall with its dim gaslight, the three repulsive faces staring at her, and the first two steps of a flight of stairs whose lower part descended to impenetrable gloom.

The woman had long white teeth, and as her upper lip was drawn back, not only they but much of the gum was visible. As she now smiled at Agnes in a way peculiarly malevolent, the teeth seemed fearfully long, while so much of the gum came into the gaslight that Agnes shrank back to the very head of the basement stairs, crying, "Where is mamma? Where is mamma?" She had never expected to call upon her stepmother for help, but carrying buckets of water and receiving blows in return was more to

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

be desired than a closer acquaintance with the lady in fine clothes.

“She’s sold you, and you belong to me body and soul,” said the woman in fine clothes, with her dreadful smile. “If your pa doesn’t die in the hospital, he might as well as far as *you’re* concerned, as he doesn’t know anything about my house. You do as you’re told, and we’ll keep you warm and feed you well. If you don’t do as you’re told, I’ll have you beat and beat till there’s no breath left in your body.”

“But I don’t want to stay here,” Agnes sobbed; “not a-tall!”

“Yes, a good many don’t at first. Now I’m busy, with no time to waste on such milk-and-chalk as *you*, Miss Aggie. Listen to every word I say, for if I ever have to tell you again——” She showed all her gums as she bit off the sentence. “You’re going to stay right down in the basement of this house for the next five years, and if you do whatever the cook says you’ll be let alone; but if ever you disobey her, just once, she’s to tell me. And when she tells me, I’ll tell these two men; and when I tell these two men, they’ll put you in their cart and drive you to the river and throw you in, with a rock around your neck. If you’re good, we’ll fatten you till you’re twelve, and then everything will be all right. In the meantime, I don’t want to lay my eyes on you, so you keep down in the basement—for if we once catch sight of you up here, you’ll wish

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

you'd never been born. You'll have a life of idleness and ease as long as you're good; and whenever I say 'good' I mean doing as you're told."

The lady in fine clothes must have given some secret signal, for now a form emerged from black space, its head and shoulders appearing above the basement steps like the detached bust of a woman that nature had originally intended for a man. This was the cook, and when she stood in the hall she towered above the two men who lounged against the wall. Agnes believed she could have whipped both of them. To be that tall, that big in every way, and yet a woman, was marvelous, and Agnes felt for her profound admiration. Large as her features were, grim and relentless though their expression, her face showed none of the sensuous cruelty of the lady in fine clothes, and the child caught a breath of relief.

"Clem," the mistress addressed the cook, "here's the girl who's to be your little servant for the next five years. Treat her well if she's good, and keep her out of my sight. If she's not good let me know, and I'll make her good."

"I guess she'll be good," said Clem, looking at Agnes grimly.

The mistress continued threateningly: "I've just explained that being good means obeying. Do you think it would help her to drag her up and down the hall by her ears a few times?"

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

“Let me do it,” Wiggles volunteered, with a ferocious grin.

“I’ll be good!” Agnes cried in terror. “I’ll be good!”

“Take her away, then, and take her quick!” cried the lady in fine clothes. “My hands are just itching to get at her.”

“You come along!” the cook commanded harshly, and, without looking back to find if she were followed, she tramped down the steps like a policeman in petticoats.

The gloom lifted as Agnes descended into it and in the hall below, the light from an open door showed two doors on each side and another at the rear. Clem went to this last, opened it, and showed Agnes a brief glimpse of the court. “There’s just one outside door,” Clem said, “and this is it. And if you ever open it without permission I’ll tell the mistress, and she’ll do the rest.”

“I won’t ever,” Agnes faltered, looking longingly at the bit of outdoors.

Clem slammed the door. “I’d advise you not to,” she remarked. “Come along to your own room.” She walked with long swinging strides to the open door, through which streamed light from a gas-bracket, and presently closed themselves in with the light, seeming, in doing so, to shut out all the rest of the house with its strange mysteries. “I don’t allow anybody in my room, not even the mistress,”

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

Clem said. “So as long as you behave yourself, you’re safe with me.”

Agnes, always looking for straws of comfort, found one floating on the current of these words, but was afraid to clutch at it too eagerly lest she go down with it. For such a large woman, Clem’s room was small, built to conform to the basement stairs directly over it. There was a hydrant in a corner, a disreputable trunk whose sides were slowly peeling off as from some skin disease, and a square of Brussels carpet beside the neat bed—a bed maybe big enough for Clem, but surely not bigger.

“Your room opens into mine,” Clem said. Agnes looked at the corner, but saw only an old bureau with one caster gone and another getting ready to leave, its mirror tilted so far back on account of Clem’s amazing height that when Agnes looked at it she saw nothing but a scrap of ceiling. At last she discovered the door of her “room”—no wonder she hadn’t seen it sooner, for it was only three feet high, and the iron bedstead was pushed square against it.

When the bed was pulled away the “room” was revealed—nothing but a closet, the lowest part of the staircase boarded up; even at the entrance Agnes couldn’t stand upright, and at its extremity it was just high enough for the end of the pallet. The pallet took up all the floor space, so she was obliged to undress in the outer chamber. Lying on the floor,

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

she couldn't have kicked her ceiling very hard; it wasn't far enough away.

She peeped through the low opening. Clem sat bolt upright upon a stool, and, although she was sewing with a thimble on her finger, and held a quantity of white goods in her lap, it was hard to think she was not a man. The big, hard face seemed cut out of iron; the broad shoulders, flat chest, erect back, long arms, far-extended limbs and frankly planted feet recalled the policeman of Shady Court, who, despite his giant proportions, rarely interfered in the fighting because he “stood in.” For all the grimness of this jailer, there was something about her—impossible to define—suggesting that she, too, might “stand in.”

Because she was greatly perplexed, and because she entertained this hope that Clem might “stand in,” Agnes presently crept from her pallet into the outer room, small and barefooted, holding up in both arms the ends of the great nightgown in which she had been swathed.

“Clem,” she said.

Clem, watching her needle, made no response; not the quiver of a muscle showed that she had heard.

“Clem!” Agnes twisted her nightgown round and round, then untwisted it. “There’s something I’ve forgot, but maybe you’d know.”

Clem bent her head to bite off a thread, then went on as if she’d never heard of scissors.

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

“Clem, they was a pretty lady in old Shady what one day she learned me how to pray, and I guess if there was ever a time for praying, the time’s come, don’t you? Winsie only told me how once, and I ain’t got it straight.”

Holding up her needle toward the gaslight, Clem threaded it with great severity; then, instead of answering, she resumed her sewing as if quite alone.

“You get down on your knees,” Agnes said wistfully, “and close your eyes, and looks like my little room was just made to do it in, and nothing else. But I forget how to *start* it.”

After a long silence, Clem said, not looking up: “Little girl, you’ll catch cold standing there. Go to bed.”

Although the voice was deep and gruff, it didn’t sound as if a blow were coming, so Agnes went back to her pallet feeling that affairs were going rather well. Kneeling beside her pillow, she prayed:

“I’ve forgot how you start it, God, and I don’t know what you say when you get through, but I’m Your little girl. Good night.”

When she opened her eyes, she found Clem watching her; and although she turned to her sewing as quick as she could—the first hasty movement she had shown—Agnes caught a glimpse of her face, and concluded that, after all, it did not seem cut out of iron.

XIII

MAKING FRIENDS WITH THE JAILER

WHEN Agnes woke up, the morning light showed the fluted ceiling within reach of her hand, and at first she did not remember that it was the reverse side of the staircase. But when she did, she recalled with terror the repulsive face of the lady in fine clothes and the two ruffians who had brought her in the jolting cart. Then came the image of Clem, huge and manlike, and she whispered, "I don't believe Clem'll let 'em git me!" As she dressed in the outer room, she noted with a sense of comfort the dresses hung along the walls—dresses that insisted that Clem was *not* a man—and observed with the eye of pleased acquaintanceship the trunk with the breaking out on its diseased sides, the hydrant under whose basin a slender pipe ran down into the floor, and the three-castered bureau, its mirror tipped so far back that it looked far from sober.

As Agnes, not knowing what was expected of her, perched upon Clem's stool, her feet off the floor, she found the window most interesting of all. The curtain had been rolled up and looped in a cord, and

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

Agnes could see the brick pavement of the back-yard, the windowless walls of two houses that hemmed it in on two sides, and, at the end, a stone wall which rose from the basement level to the level of the street. There was apparently no climbing out of that well of a basement-yard! Suppose Clem were a prisoner like Agnes, and should try to escape? Well, by a strong effort of the imagination, you could see Clem scale that stone wall, although it was two or three times higher than she—you could plant her ample feet on top of that wall. But between her and freedom would rise yonder solid board fence built upon the wall. How could you get her over that huge barricade? You couldn't, and it made Agnes dizzy to try. And besides, suppose Clem should almost reach the top—then fall—*oh, goodness!* Agnes gave a jump and clutched the stool with both hands.

Some time later she heard chairs scraping on a bare floor, then footsteps right over her head. Girls and women were going up from the basement dining room and the confused murmur of voices reached her—not an agreeable murmur, either. After that the house was dead until the door was flung suddenly open—but if Clem expected to catch her trying to climb out the window she was disappointed. Clem looked grimmer by daylight, iron-cut, without a soft line to her body. The touch of gray in her heavy hair, instead of softening the effect, lent coldness, like snow on a granite mountain. The long

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

white apron was so long that Agnes felt her brain reeling when trying to count the rows of blue checks, so she counted, instead, the white buttons down the back of the waist.

“Come on!” muttered Clem in a deadened voice, not so deadened, however, but to intimate that if not instantly obeyed it would become very much alive. Agnes jumped from the stool and followed, as she did so storing away among her impressions of Clem the great horn tuck-comb, and the shoes ripped up the sides that the feet might feel at home.

“Use coffee?” she asked, as they sat down to the table recently vacated by the inmates of the dead house.

“’Bout all my breakfast ever is,” Agnes answered confidentially.

After a long silence Clem spoke: “Mercy, child, don’t you ever use your fork?”

“I ain’t yet. They was once I ate in a big, big, *fine* house where a lady lived that’s gone over the ocean now, and she put one on the table for me. I just let it alone.”

“Look,” said Clem. She stuck her fork into a bit of beefsteak, slowly raised it to show that all was fair, that no sleight-of-hand would be practiced, and the fork returned to the plate in safety. Laboriously Agnes went through this maneuver, remarking that it tasted just the same.

“Where do you come from, child?”

“Old Shady; Shady Court in the Bad Lands.”

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

"Father and mother?"

"Father and a step. He was always drunk, mostly. The stove turned over on him, and he's blind and in a hospital. He said not to let mamma get me, 'cause she'd sold me to the lady in fine clothes. I wish I could see him now."

"Were you happy in Shady Court?"

"Oh, no, *ma'am!* But I belonged there. I'd like to be there this minute 'f it was *ever* so cold."

"Got friends there, I guess?"

"N-no. But I like Old Shady—it's *home*."

Clem said nothing. "They is a girl there, Jenny Tildy. She let me sleep in her room last night I was there. That was nice. I was hiding from my step-mother. And Winsie, she's just as *pretty*, and she learned me how to pray, but I forgot—and she's gone 'way, 'way off. And a p'liceman at the station he give me a dime. But the lady in the big, big, *fine* house was going to do something awful nice for me—may be take me across the ocean—only I had to go to the hospital to see papa, and so she boated away. But I can't talk and fork at the same time," she concluded, with renewed appetite.

Clem asked, when they rose, "Do you know how to scrape up dishes?"

"They wasn't never no scrapings at our place."

"Then watch me, for this is to be part of your work. And don't ever talk to me about yourself again unless I ask questions."

XIV

CLEM DISCOVERS THE LETTER

ABOUT a week later, as Clem towered beside the kitchen sink, washing the dishes, and Agnes, her head hardly reaching her waistline, dried them on an enormous tea-towel, the giantess asked: "Who's trying to get you out of this house? They needn't try!"

The child didn't know what she meant, but she smiled, for a week of silence had oppressed her more than blows and starvation in Shady Court. "I'm glad you're going to talk," she said, looking up, and thinking how much talk must be stored away in that great form.

Clem was very dry. "So you can read, can you?" she accused her.

Agnes shook her head. "But Jenny Tildy can."

Clem suddenly stooped and grasped Agnes' arm compellingly. "Tell me who passed you that note, and how she got it to you—and tell me quick! I ought to carry you right up to the mistress, but if you'll make a clean breast of it maybe I will and maybe I won't."

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

Still Agnes could not understand.

She was so completely in her power that Clem felt no shade of anger—did not even think it worth while to sneer. “You weak little mouse, do you think you can hide anything from my cat’s-eyes? I’ve been catching you staring at that note when you thought I wasn’t looking, then sticking it in your bosom as quick as a flash—but not as quick as *my* flash. I’ve been watching and waiting. Out with it—this instant!” And Clem’s big hand outspread as if to tear off the entire front of her dress.

“Wait—wait!” Agnes panted. “I’ll give it to you—I know what you mean, now—don’t hurt me, Clem, you’d be sorry—here is what it is——”

Clem grabbed the bits of paper out of her hand—there were two torn pieces—and read, “He that loveth not, knoweth not God; for God is love.”

“Jenny Tildy read it same way,” Agnes said breathlessly. “G’on, Clem, the rest is just as good.”

Clem stared at the next verse, but something got in her eyes and maybe she couldn’t make out the words very well; at any rate, she did not go on.

Agnes, finding her arm released, took courage. “Jenny Tildy found it in the street, and when she’d read it she just give it to me. A piece of God’s book. Did you know He’d fixed up a book to tell about things? He can make books as easy as stars; easier, I guess.”

Clem stood a long time just looking at the bits

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

of paper. When she roused herself, as from a dream, she said with exceeding harshness: "You've got no use for this—and neither have I—neither have I. I'm done with all that. Go put it in the stove—burn it up."

"But, oh, it's a piece of God's book, Clem, a piece of God's book, all ever I saw. You can't burn His book. It ain't yours"—Agnes was in despair—"it's my very own—Jenny Tildy give it to me."

"Everything you got is mine," retorted Clem, her eyes smoldering. "Besides, if you can't read, what good is it to you?"

Agnes struck her heart convulsively. "But I can feel it *here*," she pleaded.

The cook, with a loud exclamation of anger, strode to the stove and thrust the paper among the burning coals. "If you ever talk about that again," she cried in a voice trembling with excitement, "if you ever mention that name again——"

"God?" whispered Agnes, suppressing her sobs.

Clem shouted in desperation: "YES! If you ever do—I'll take you upstairs, and the mistress will drop you down into the Dark Room, and that'll be your finish."

Before Agnes' vision rose the vice-bleared eyes, the fanglike teeth and hideous gums of the lady in fine clothes. And there was something just in the casual mention of that "Dark Room" that doubled her sense of terror. She cried out frantically: "I

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

won't say it again! I'll do what you want, Clem! I want to stay with you!”

When work was resumed, Agnes wondered why nobody liked to talk about God. It was the purest accident that she had ever learned anything about Him. Her father had almost killed her just because she murmured His name in her sleep—pretty Winsie had told her how to pray just to spite the lady in the big, big, *fine* house, and that lady had shown a willingness to discuss any other subject. Jenny Tildy had declared that nothing was taught about Him in the public schools. What was the matter with God that everybody was sorry to hear Him mentioned?

XV

WHAT AGNES FOUND IN THE BUREAU DRAWER

AGNES found her life of silent hiding in Clem's room and the daily round of menial duties terribly monotonous—in Shady Court there had at least been the variety of being sometimes hungry and sometimes filled, in the midst of a thousand voices. To break this monotony, she asked Clem, one day, if she might claim the bottom bureau-drawer—the one that had only one knob and mustn't be pulled hard by that knob, for it would stick; and when it stuck there was nothing to be done but push it back and begin over.

"You've no use for a drawer," returned Clem, decidedly.

"I know I ain't got nothing," Agnes said, "but if ever I did, I'd have a place to put it."

To that Clem returned no word, did not even move her eyelashes; but that night as she sewed on her stool after the day's work, she said, "You can have the bottom drawer."

Agnes, who was sitting on her pallet in the cramped closet, jumped up—hitting her head, of

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

course—but it never hurts so bad when one strikes one's own head. She flew to the bureau and seized the one knob—the drawer stuck; but when it finally came open, she saw that Clem had taken from it all her belongings, leaving a delightfully bare space.

Agnes, seated on the floor and admiring this emptiness, exclaimed, “Clem, you must of had a little girl of your own, once!”

“Yes,” said Clem, biting her thread, “I did.”

Agnes did not forget the bureau drawer, but she pushed it back in the recess of her mind—holding to it, as it were, by one knob—and cried, “Oh, tell me about that little girl!” And she stared at the long nose, the broad cheeks, the erect form, the tuck-comb, the big shoes cut up the sides. “Was she *very* little, Clem?”

Suddenly Clem laid down her sewing. “Listen, child. Would you like to play in the basement yard to-morrow?”

Agnes clasped her hands—“Oh, *Clem!*”

“Very well, when your work is ended, I'm going to trust you. But if I ever catch you trying to get away, or if you ever hesitate a second to come in when I call, it'll be your last time. When I say *come*, it means that second, for the next second, I mightn't be there, and the mistress might.”

“I'll *always* come just when you say.” Agnes had let go of the drawer-knob. The thought of having

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

the sky once more resting on her hair fairly took away her breath.

“Another thing: if anybody ever goes out there you’re to run back here without speaking one word to them. If you try to talk to the girls, or to cry out, you may be sure I’ll know it.”

“I bet!” Agnes cried admiringly. “I’d like to see anybody fool you, wouldn’t *you*, Clem!”

Clem looked at her with an odd expression and added, “My little girl was named Jasmine. It’s thinking of her that makes me want to do you a kindness, so if you’re glad to get outdoors once more, I don’t want you to thank me, I want you to thank my little girl. That’s enough about her—don’t ever mention her again.”

Agnes’ world seemed a bad place for God and little girls! But that was a wonderful bureau-drawer! Clem might see only the white pine sides, but to Agnes, it was full of outdoors. The first time she had ever opened it, she found a little girl named Jasmine standing in the sunlight and calling her to come to play.

XVI

AGNES FREES A PRISONER

THE next day Agnes fluttered out into the court like a timid but eager little bird. Oh, what a garden of delight!—a sunken garden, with bricks of different colors for flowers, from soft, warm, mellow yellow to a glorious living red. When they were not flowers to be gazed upon in wrapt delight, she used them as paints with a broad board for canvas—even the harsh, dull red bits that leave hardly a scratch, that put your teeth on edge, that you dislike, but that you add to your palet in order to have something of every kind.

In a few days she knew every foot of that well-like enclosure: the brick paving; the blind walls of the neighboring houses extending past the rear of her prison-house; the high stone wall at the end surmounted by the equally high plank fence—knew all this so well that she could have found her way about in the dark. On the basement floor of her prison-house (which she thought of constantly as the dead house) was the only door into the court, also three windows looking out from the kitchen,

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

the dining-room and Clem's room; also another window with shutters never opened—that was the Dark Room that couldn't be entered except by a trapdoor in its ceiling. Agnes never wanted to be put in the Dark Room, and no matter how tired she grew of her captivity she wouldn't complain, she'd always mind, because that was what the mistress meant by being “good.”

“Clem,” Agnes said when once she found the cook watching her from the bedroom window—it was so friendly when Clem looked out of the window at her!—“would you mind if I took up a brick in the corner? I'd like to see sure-enough dirt.”

As usual, Clem only stared, saying nothing.

Agnes added hastily, “I didn't want you to think if you saw me at it that I was trying to dig my way out.”

Clem darted her eyes at the massive wall, then at the child's small person and answered gravely, “I understand you, Aggie. Dig all you please.”

With a broken shovel for spade Agnes skipped away—skipped because her buoyant energy could not possibly find its vent in mere walking. At a distant corner, where the refuse barrels stood, there had been so many overflows that the bricks had softened under their affliction; and here with the handle of her shovel, having pried up an ink-black oblong of decay, she pursued her adventure with throbbing heart. The sunlight played upon her dark, short-

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

cropped hair—what a day! warm and fragrant which March had stolen out of summer’s bag of days.

Then came the denouement, the crisis. And Clem, hurrying to the window on hearing the cry, found Agnes with upraised shovel, her face flushed as if she had just unearthed buried treasure. “Oh, look, look!” cried Agnes, not thrusting her fingers among yellow doubloons, but hovering over a discomfited fishingworm on the open theater of her shovel-blade. “Oh, Clem, *can’t* I keep him—something of my very, very own!”

Clem took all the trouble of coming out into the yard to bring an empty can—a royal prison for the captive, all red and gold with words made of round-topped letters; and this can, containing the worm bedded down in some of the dirt he loved so well, was placed in the bottom bureau-drawer, where Agnes, seated on the Brussels rug, admired it silently.

At night when Clem sat stiffly on her stool at her everlasting sewing, she asked, “Where’s your pet?”—for she saw that the drawer was empty.

“I turned him loose,” Agnes answered, clasping her knees as she stared into the drawer trying to see Jasmine in the sunlight calling her out to play.

Clem bit off her thread. “Huh! It’ll be turning cold again—he’d have been much warmer in your can. No doubt, now, he’ll freeze stiff.”

“Yes’m. But whichever way he turned, he was

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

always coming up against a side of his can; I knowed just how he felt about it, so I let 'im go. The whole world is his to crawl in—it *b'longs* to 'im.” After a pause she added pensively, “And yet he ain't nothing but a worm!”

Clem had very long arms. Otherwise, she could not have reached from her stool to rest her heavy hand with exceeding lightness upon Agnes' head. Agnes held her breath and pretended not to notice anything. Clem did not say a word, just let her hand lie there a moment or so, then snatched it away and fell to sewing furiously, as if her hand had strayed from home without her knowledge and must do extra work for punishment.

Agnes bent her head and stared into the empty drawer, and, as plain as possible she saw little Jasmine with a smile on her face, love in her eyes. As often as Agnes had evoked this charming figure from the depths of her imagination, this was the first time she had noticed that Jasmine looked very much like Clem.

XVII

CLEM GIVES AGNES A SURPRISE

BEFORE autumn, Clem had begun to change, but she didn't know it; and even when winter had the basement-court in his tight fist, and Agnes could tell the difference, and was glad, because as the earth grew cold Clem grew warm, still Clem failed to see the signs. When winter traveled right into the heart of spring, bringing his own weather with him, so that March seemed to have mixed his days with somebody else's, Clem still imagined herself the same.

But Agnes knew better. Once the cook had been frozen through and through—she hadn't melted yet, but she was thawing. Here and there along the margins of her nature, little coves and harbors were feeling a mild current, but the frogs hadn't lifted up their eager trebles. Sometimes, though, there was a timid trill.

"Agnes," Clem said one night—always that drudgery of needle and thread!—"would you like to learn to read?"

She shook her head doubtfully. "Read what, Clem?"

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

"Language. It would help fill up your time. I taught my little girl before she was as old as you. And now she is a very fine young lady. She's at a conservatory in a big city."

"Would I be a fine lady if I learned to read language?"

"You'll never be one if you don't."

"All right, I don't want to learn, because I don't want to be a fine lady, not even like the lady in the big, big, *fine* house that went across the ocean—Miss Jocelyn her name was. She was *awful* fine. I guess she could read all kinds of language. I don't want no fineness for me."

Clem was plainly discomfited. "Why not?"

Agnes hesitated. "You'd be mad if I told you."

"I'll be madder if you don't."

After that, what was a little girl to do? "Clem, Miss Jocelyn was as rich as *anything* and could paint and play the piano and sing—but she don't like God. And Winsie, nobody's prettier than Winsie and has nicer things, but *she* don't like God. And there's you—I don't know any other fine ladies. I'd ruther be His little girl. Was only one thing ever I would want to read and it's burned up and 'f I can't read it, I don't want to read nothing."

Clem made no answer and a whole week passed without another word about reading language, and after so long a time, Agnes supposed the subject would never be revived, for a week seems nearly as

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

long as Always when you are only eight years old.

“Agnes,” Clem said at the end of the week, “the time has come for you to learn to read.” And with a resolute air, she laid aside her sewing. “Go look under your pillow and bring me what you find.”

Agnes, wondering, went to her closet; and there was a big book with edges of gold and pictures on heavy pages; and because it was so wondrously beautiful, and because Clem watched with such a strange expression, Agnes cried out, “It’s God’s book!”

“Yes, Aggie. It must be a great deal to Him to know that even in a house such as this, there’s one to love Him. I imagine every time He looked down into the Bad Lands and saw scraps of His Word hidden in your bosom—before I burnt them—He was pleased.”

“Pleased with *me*! Oh, Clem!” Agnes carried the Bible on eager feet; when she reached the stool, she gave a jump—and her arms were about Clem’s neck. In that first embrace, the Bible was pressed to the heart of each.

XVIII

CLEM MUST HAVE BIG MONEY

IN a life of freedom, one may regard the school room as a prison, but in her prison, Agnes found the schoolroom a playground for happy thoughts. Learning to read was slow work, but there was so much time!—and as Clem, stiffly seated with the open Bible upon her great knees, pointed with long, gnarled finger the way through a country of strange and bristling words, the child perched on a chair, then stood leaning against the teacher's shoulder, then perched, then stood . . . and never did learn the best attitude for the reception of knowledge.

“But don't you give me up,” she urged when the other would offer holidays, “whenever it takes, it's a-going to spread!” And after Clem had pulled a great many words apart, and Agnes had learned that what was “o” in *hot* was “o” in *cold*, it began to “take.” Later, familiar words got together and between them produced a thought; and then it “spread.”

Clem never would discuss what they read aloud, and if the pupil commented on any practical appli-

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

cation of a verse, she had a way of saying, "Lesson's ended for the day," that showed, in giving Agnes religion, she meant to keep back none for herself. Sometimes the little wayfarer would fall asleep beside a well too deep for her pitcher, and Clem, sewing resumed, would look up from time to time, wondering how it would all end. The needle-hand might poise itself motionless, the stitched goods might fall forgotten upon the floor. Did the wide gray eyes really see Agnes or were they staring back at the little Jasmine of the Other Life? In these days Clem often looked over her shoulder into the past.

"Don't you never get your sewing sewed?" Agnes asked, one night, having fallen asleep, then trying to look as if she hadn't.

Clem was grim. "I never get all the money I need. That's why I stay here, and that's why I sew. I'm paid big money, and big money's what I've got to have."

"It's nice to have money," Agnes agreed. "Once a policeman give me ten cents. I bought some hot sweet potatoes with half of it. Do you like to live in a dead house, Clem?"

"What makes you call this a dead house?"

"It's all so still, like. And there's the Dark Room."

"Huh! It's still to you because you're in the basement. Noise up there enough now, if you only

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

knew—big dance. A house of thieves is what I call it. No, I don't like a house of thieves, but I like big money. And when you go after big money you can't be too particular.”

“Clem, is it just people that hates God that has big money?”

Clem grew really excited, and her face was red all over. “I couldn't make enough anywhere else. I'd be willing to go to a decent place and work my fingers to the bone—I'd cook and clean, cook and clean from morning to night, seven days in the week; but they won't give you enough at decent places, that's where they *save*, in the fine houses—on their *servants*. They'll spend thousands of dollars on flowers and automobiles and pet dogs, but if they pay the cook a dollar a day, they think it's outrageous.”

“And you just *got* to have big money!” Agnes sighed sympathetically.

“Yes, I have!” Clem bit off her thread. Whenever she did that, it seemed to settle it.

“But,” Agnes persisted, “why is it just people that lives in thieves' houses that's willing to pay big money?”

Suddenly a harsh voice broke upon the room: “What's all this talk about thieves' houses?”

Agnes screamed in terror, and even the giantess Clem trembled, for there in the door stood, as for some time she must have been standing, the lady in

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

fine clothes—that is, the mistress of this house of thieves. Her face which when last seen by Agnes had been only repulsive, was now fearful in its anger.

XIX

CLEM TO THE RESCUE

IT was not because the mistress had heard Agnes call the place a house of thieves, but because she suspected Clem of conspiracy that she was so furious. "You little pious fraud!" She gripped her arm and Clem, not knowing how much had been overheard, sat passive, afraid, for Agnes' sake, to interfere. It was like a tornado filling the room with lightnings and thunderings and sweeping the child away on a resistless blast to the upstairs hall. Here where the ruffians had brought her so long ago, she had but a moment's rest while the mistress explained that she was to be punished—pouring into her ears such a steady stream of oaths that it was very much like being back home in Old Shady Court. Hardly before she had caught her breath a door was flung open, and into the midst of a room glittering with lights and joyous with orchestra-music she was pushed—thrown prostrate upon the polished floor.

She staggered up, dazed and terrified. Couples waltzed madly; others, seated or standing, pre-

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

served the clinging waltz-attitude. How pretty the ladies in their bright dresses; how well-dressed and laundered the gentlemen!—and how everybody laughed to see the child blinking her eyes at the brilliant scene, laughed not because she was funny, or because the pathetic little face amused them but because one must laugh in thieves' houses, lest one's heart break.

“Stop that noise, you fools!” This was a special request to the orchestra from the mistress. The sound of violins ceased, and the three young men on the platform who had produced it, stared at Agnes, with cigarettes tilted from mouth-corners, and hats on backs of sleek heads. Did the great innocent eyes of bewildered Agnes remind them of the time when on other eyes—such as those of their mothers—the sight of them had painted pride?

“What 're you bringing that kid in here for?” protested the accompanist at the piano—a tall, stately lady with roses in her hair and in her cheeks, and withered leaves in her heart.

“She's got to be punished!” the mistress cried, “and I want all of you to think of the worst thing we can do to her, for she's been bad.”

Then one after another they began suggesting dreadful punishments. Agnes thought—“Oh, where is Clem? Sitting on her stool, sewing, while I . . .” But it did not seem strange that Clem should desert her, for hadn't she deserted far more when coming

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

to the house where there was big money? She mustn't be blamed—she had been so kind when it cost nothing. To interfere now might lose her place. People don't invest in a good that pays no interest. Agnes felt this vaguely and clenched her hands to keep from screaming.

Presently the woman with roses in her hair and face and withered leaves in her heart, interrupted: “Make her sing a song—I won't stand for anything more than that. Make her sing a song, then let her go.” She meant to spare the child much worse, but Agnes thought this very hard.

The mistress hesitated.

“You got me, didn't you?” the accompanist cried, louder than before. “I said a song, and that's enough.” She pitied the little prisoner, and felt somehow akin to her; if one gropes one's way back in any life of the Bad Lands, one finds a childhood.

“Then get up on that platform, you little monkey!” snarled the mistress, “and sing out loud and clear or I'll strangle ye.”

Agnes faltered, “But I never knowed but one song, and not all of it.”

“Get there!” The mistress controlled her fury by an effort. “Don't you keep these good people waiting.”

“A song! A song!” cried the good people, like a chorus in an opera. The orchestra scraped back their chairs to make room for her, but as she stood in

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

silence, afraid to sing her one song, the mistress fancied she meant to prove obdurate.

“This’ll clear your voice,” said the mistress, standing on the floor at the margin of the platform—and she vented her spite in a stinging slap that sent Agnes reeling back against the knees of one of the young violinists. Clear her voice—that was good! There was noisy laughter.

The young man caught her by the shoulders, and gently pushed her forward, saying, “Easy, kid—go through with it.”

Agnes had sung her one song thousands of times in the solitude of the basement-yard and though she could not recall many of the original words, she had so often employed the same substitutes that they came readily, stretching the tune to make themselves fit. The tune itself she knew well, for when Miss Jocelyn had sung this song for her in the big, big, *fine* house, she had recognized it as one often heard from the hand-organ.

Her sweet, slender voice stole timidly forth as if seeking some cool, dark hiding-nook——

“Nearer, my God, to Thee,
Nearer to Thee,
Even if it’s being hungry and cold
That gets me close to Thee.
Still all my song will be
Just getting close to Thee,

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

Nearer every day to Thee,
Nearer—nearer——”

The face of the little singer was growing brighter and brighter as consciousness of staring eyes faded away. Her look of exaltation so enraged the mistress that, seizing a bottle half full of whisky, she raised it, to hurl it at her prisoner——

“But I guess not!” roared a terrible voice, so harsh, so deep, it was almost a strong man’s voice. Clem stood towering, holding the mistress by her wrist.

“Oh, Clem, you *did* come! you *did* come! I never thought you would!”—And Agnes’ soft arms about the hard neck, Agnes’ kisses on her face. Sometimes events follow each other so swiftly, one cannot think of them with any clearness until one is tucked up in bed at night. After such events as those of the beautiful ballroom it is good to peep through one’s closet door and see a mighty Clem on her stool like a doughty guardsman with needle instead of sword.

Usually Clem sewed for other people, but that night she mended her own dress, for there had been as terrible a fight as ever made Old Shady Court seem like home—even a policeman had forced an entrance and had had something to drink and had gone away with his hand in his pocket. The lady with roses in her hair and cheeks and withered

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

leaves in her heart went also, but not until the mistress had promised to leave Agnes in the basement with Clem until she was twelve years old, at least. So it was all arranged: Clem was to stay and be paid as before; and Agnes was never to be taken upstairs again.

“After she’s twelve, though,” the mistress had said, with all her gums exposed, and her long teeth looking ready to bite, “she’s got to stay up with the other girls, and earn her food and clothes as they do in my ‘*house of thieves*.’ ” (Thus she threw back Agnes’ words.)

“But I see her doing it!” Clem had said, when she and Agnes were alone, her voice emphatically showing that she saw quite the contrary. “I’ll be here then, won’t I?” That was all Agnes asked—for Clem to be there. “That’s not all,” Clem went on, and then she heaped these marvels on top of each other till the child was really dizzy: “I’m going to get you a pet. A fishing-worm? *No!*—a cat, a sure-enough cat. And I’m going to buy you some flower-seeds, and let you raise flowers in boxes. You’ll watch ’em grow, and you’ll feed the cat, and you’ll be twelve years old in no time at all—and then . . . *we’ll see!*” And when she said “*we’ll see,*” like that, Agnes looked right through the stone wall and plank fence of her prison-yard, and saw Jasmine standing where the grass was growing, and Jasmine was calling her out to play.

XX

FLOWERS, A CAT, AND A FRIEND

CLEM named the cat Felix—which showed that she knew some Latin and understood the disposition of some felines—for if there was ever a happy cat, it was the one that came to live in the prison-yard. Perhaps no cat ever had such polite and affectionate attention as that old-gold gentleman with his graceful movements, his agreeable purr and his well-kept whiskers. That board fence was nothing to him—he could go over it like a splash of yellow light thrown from a shifting mirror. Sometimes he came back sadly bedraggled, proving that all the world is not grass on the Other Side of prison walls; sometimes he perched on the very top of the fence, his four paws warming each other, his body like a ball, his amber eyes looking for mice in the clouds. In winter he thought the basement a brick-and-stone paradise and when Agnes was reading aloud from her only book, growing more and more at ease with seldom-met words, he'd stretch out at her feet, gently waving his tail to and fro when he heard the wind blowing. When the reading ceased

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

he would rise and solemnly walk off to bed—his bed, of course, was in the bottom bureau-drawer—so Agnes had not only a place to keep something, but something to put in it.

Flowers, a cat, and a friend—— No wonder Agnes thought it a happy thing to be ten years old! Possibly with some thought of celebrating the birthday, Clem asked, that night, “How would you like for me to tell you the story of my life?”

“Lies?” Agnes inquired politely. She had just closed her book and was wishing that Felix could understand that she was out of nine. It had seemed as if she would never be out of nine, but here she was, safe and sound, getting pretty close to twelve and then—*goodness!* What would happen?

“No, no, all true. I’d like to tell you, to-night. Then you’ll always remember that when you were ten, you heard about Jasmine. Once I was just a girl, so giddy, so, *so* young . . . and I lived in a small town called Bellby, and had everything I needed. My parents didn’t want me to marry a certain young man who was the handsomest young man I ever saw. . . . So I ran away with him and we were married in the city. My parents had objected because he drank and they were afraid he’d always drink.”

“They do,” Agnes said wisely; “anyway, mine did—papa, I mean, if he could get the money.”

“Yes. He tried to find work—we were too proud

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

to let them know back home how we suffered for something to eat and wear—he found all sorts of jobs, for he was quick, and both of us were fairly well educated; but every time he got work, he'd lose it—get drunk, you know."

"Poor Clem!" sighed Agnes, "but there's *nothing* we can do!"

For a while Clem said nothing. "One day—he was drunk—a wagon ran into him and—killed him. And I was left alone with my baby. Then I wrote home, and my father answered after a long time, and his letter told me that mother was dead, and I had better not come back—so I never wrote again. . . . You ought to have seen Jasmine! She had the deepest, deepest blue eyes, and hair like yellow silk, and when she smiled, there was light in the attic." Clem stopped altogether, staring into space.

Presently Agnes said softly, "Now I see her—g'on, Clem!"

"I tried hard, *hard*, to find work, but nobody wanted a woman with an infant, and how could I leave her to go places? After a while we didn't have enough to eat, and she got sick, so thin and waxen—and then the landlord was going to turn us out, and then . . . and then——" as Clem still stared fixedly into space, the tears began to steal down her cheeks without her knowledge—"and then we had all we needed, and more."

"Then Jasmine smiled, I guess."

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

“That’s it, dear Agnes, that’s it!—Jasmine smiled, and grew round and dimpled, and had nice things to wear. Although I wasn’t twenty, I told myself I’d had my life, and my baby must have her chance. She couldn’t have a chance without money, and she couldn’t have a chance if she stayed with me because I had to get the money in the Bad Lands. So I found a good woman to keep her until I could make enough to carry her away, but paying her board, and looking out for myself, took all I could get. When you make your money in the Bad Lands it’s seldom you escape to the good lands.”

“But you are going with me,” said Agnes confidently, “when I’m twelve.”

“When I saw it wasn’t any use—after long years of it—I let the woman who cared for Jasmine think I was dead. Then I hunted up a man in the Bad Lands—a good man—and told him I was a rich cousin of Jasmine’s mother, and wanted her put in a boarding-school and kept there till she was educated—and he promised to attend to it; and did. And since then I’ve paid her way.”

“It was handy to have that man to go to,” Agnes sighed, with satisfaction. “Lots of things just happen, that way.”

“*He* didn’t just happen,” returned Clem, biting her thread. “He was a rich man in a house fit for a king, but he sold it and came to live right amongst the worst tenements; he dresses like the

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

'day-laborers, and eats what they eat, just to show 'em how to get the best out of their poverty."

Agnes was excited. "Is his name Mr. Philip Brown?"

Clem was startled. "How did you know, child?"

"But *he*"—Agnes exclaimed, her cheeks flushed—"he is the man that stands in with God! He told Alley Jim a good deal, and Jim told me, and I just hunted and hunted *everywhere* to find him, to ask more. To think that you know *that* man! Oh, Clem, take me to him!"

"He is the one who forwards my money to the conservatory where Jasmine is learning to sing. She has a wonderful voice. Once the man—Mr. Brown—went all the way just to see and hear her, so he could tell me everything. He heard her sing. . . ." Clem's voice grew dreamy.

"If I could see that man," said Agnes wistfully, "I would go right up to him and I would ask about the water of life, and we'd talk and talk about God—I'd lots rather hear about Him than about you. But I like to hear about you, too, Clem, so g'on. Why don't you visit Jasmine?"

"She mustn't ever know that her mother lives in a house of thieves. She's never heard any bad of me, that's why I want her to think I died when she was a little girl. If I didn't make enough to keep her there, what'd become of her? I *must* make it—and I've got to make it *here*. As long as I have these

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

hands, I'll make, I'll save for her. That good man, Mr. Brown, already has a nice sum I've scraped together, and he's careful to hold back what she doesn't need. Then when I'm really dead, not just imagined dead—she'll have something of her own, and there'll be no reason for her ever to come to the Bad Lands."

Agnes did not understand all, but she was touched by that mighty current of sadness that in Clem flowed at such tragic depths. "Couldn't we go now—couldn't we run away to the man that stands in with God? Come away, Clem, let's ask him; *he* knows all about the water of life."

"Not yet——" Clem started up wildly. "I've got to have the money for my girl"—she flung out her arms—"I've *got* to have the money, God forgive me! Wait till you're twelve, you're safe here—and you have your Bible to read, and you have your prayers——"

"I wish you'd pray with me, Clem."

"I can't—not in this house of thieves."

"But *I* can!" Agnes cried stoutly.

"Yes—but I'm here from choice. Some day, maybe. Not yet. . . . After I've slipped you away—just two more years; then—maybe."

XXI

AN ATTEMPT AT ESCAPE

WHEN Clem said "Just two more years," it sounded to Agnes like trying to cross the great ocean on the cellar-door. . . . But they got over at last; for the old-gold cat waved his tail and the geraniums bloomed, and two times summer chased winter around the corner of time—and here was Agnes, much larger and stronger, and by her side Clem looking just the same. But she wasn't the same; had she been, she would never have beckoned Agnes into the bedroom, and closed and locked the door, and pulled down the blind and whispered, "Sh-h-h! Look!"—and shown a coil of rope hidden under her mattress.

"What is that for?" whispered twelve-year-old Agnes.

"Never mind," said Clem. "Just wait."

There was something so secret in her manner that Agnes thought at once of the Dark Room, so she waited a week, growing daily more uneasy because there was nothing in Clem's face to tell her not to be uneasy. At the end of a week and at the end of the day, when they were in their room as usual,

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

Clem again locked the door and again spoke in whispers:

"Time's come, Aggie. I've been watching the mistress right along, and listening to the girls talking. It's to be to-night after the dance—Wiggles is here and three other bullies of the gang. They know I'd never give you up without a big fight."

"Oh, Clem, why didn't you take me away sooner?" Agnes gasped.

Why was she going to try it even now? Clem wondered. *She* was no lady-errant seeking innocent maidens to rescue. What was there in the child's eyes to charm wild beasts in the jungles of the Bad Lands? It was going to put a stop to the getting of big money—and then what would Jasmine do, in her famous conservatory? Clem had never looked so grim as now, but Agnes liked her grimness—liked everything about her from horn tuck-comb to split shoes; for if she'd been different, how could she have been Clem?

Clem saw the love in her eyes—that was enough. "If anything happens to me, you may be saved anyhow. And if you are, some day you may see my little Jasmine." (To Clem, the fine lady with the wonderful voice soon to be graduated from the conservatory was still "little Jasmine.") "I've never told you her last name, nor where she lives, because I've been afraid to tell any one the secret that I'm

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

her mother. But I'm not afraid of you—should you meet her, you'd never betray me.”

“I never would—but, oh, Clem, nothing *must* happen to you.”

“Listen, child: nobody can tell what's in the future. I've been studying about this—it might be—how can I know?—it might be that some day Jasmine'll be in trouble . . . or want . . . or even fall into temptation of—of a kind. If you are the only one to get free of this accursed house of thieves, I want you to hunt her out; there's no particular spot on earth to claim you—why couldn't you live in the town where she lives, and be her guardian angel—as you've been mine?”

Agnes did not understand that. “Of course, there's nothing to take me to Old Shady Court,” she admitted. “I'd as leave live one place as another, and rather, too, if Jasmine was there.”

“But you'd never hint to her that you'd ever heard of her, or her mother?”

“Of course, I wouldn't.”

“Bring your Bible.”

Agnes brought her Bible, and laying her hand upon it as Clem directed, promised, if possible, to live near Jasmine, but never to betray the great secret.

“Clem isn't my real name——” Then she told her real name, the name Jasmine knew. And over and over she had Agnes repeat the real name, then

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

the town whither Jasmine would live after graduation. "You may not be able to go to her for years, for a child seldom has anything to say about where it's to live. But you'll be a woman some day, then you'll find her; treasure her name in your memory, and the town where she lives. And if you find her in trouble or in want——"

"I'd do anything on earth for her!" cried Agnes, her eyes shining.

"I believe you would. For I think I'd do anything on earth for you—even this." And Clem drew from under her mattress the rope which to the other's surprise was made up into a rope-ladder, fastened to an iron ring-and-hook. She explained how the attempt at flight was to be made, and Agnes, feeling very brave, agreed to everything. "We must wait till midnight, because the lights from the ballroom shine down into the court. . . . They're not coming for you till the dancing's over. Don't undress—keep awake if you possibly can, for if I have to wake you up suddenly you'd lose your nerve; and if you lose your nerve, you'll never get out of this place alive."

"I'm not going to lose my nerve," Agnes declared. She sat upright on her pallet at the closet door and stared at Clem's figure on the high stool. Clem wasn't sewing. She looked so still and grim that Agnes thought maybe she had gone to sleep, and that made her close her eyes. Then the memory of

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

the lady in fine clothes with the gums made her open them, and there sat Clem immovable, but not so distinct. She kept fading and fading, and the gas jet withdrew to become a faint star; and the walls went so far apart that Felix was lost in wide space and Agnes was nowhere at all.

When she heard her name cautiously whispered in her ear, she had the confused notion that it was by no means for the first time. Something seemed to hold her eyes tight shut, but something else had her by the arm, shaking it. She tried so hard to come out of sleep that when she knew anything she was quite exhausted.

“Quick—quick—quick!” Clem whispered three times. “They’ll be after you in a few minutes.”

“I’m afraid.” Agnes clung to her, pale as death. “Is it very dark in the court?”

“Yes, thank goodness! Come——” Clem had the rope ladder under her arm, with its ends fastened about her wrist.

Agnes began to sob. “I can’t, I can’t! The wall’s so high—and I’d fall—and it’s too dark. Oh, Clem, we’ll *never* get away—and you’d fall . . . and I’m so afraid. *She’ll* see us out there—*she’ll* get me. . . .”

Although time was so precious, Clem realized that in the other’s condition it was useless trying to escape just then. She sat down upon her stool, and with seeming calmness opened upon her knees the

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

well-worn Bible. Without looking at the cowering child she began reading:

“‘God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble. Therefore will we not fear——’ Agnes, do you believe that?”

“God said it,” Agnes sobbed. “God doesn’t tell lies.”

“He doesn’t promise *me* His strength,” said Clem, closing the book, “because *I* haven’t tried to find His water of life; so I’ve got to look out for myself. You’ve been talking about loving Him and all that, as if you were different. If God’s your strength and yet this is all the good it does you——”

“I forgot,” Agnes stammered. She stood upright. “Please don’t think less of God because I forgot, will you, Clem?”

“I’m going to watch how you act,” Clem declared. “Maybe I won’t.”

“I’m not *much* afraid—not like I was. Come on, Clem.”

Clem turned off the gas, stooped down and lifted Agnes in her great arms, and stood holding her against her breast, so very still that when at last she placed her upon her feet, Agnes whispered in a voice almost steady, “Were you praying, Clem?”

And Clem said, “Yes.” Just that. Then they crept from the basement out into the darkness of the court.

XXII

CLEM LEAVES THE BAD LANDS

CLEM still seemed a prey to dark forebodings. She drew Agnes to her side, against the grim wall. "If anything happens to me," she whispered, "what are you to do?" Agnes repeated her lesson: Mr. Philip Brown lived at such a number on such a street of the Bad Lands. She would go to him, and he would send her on to Miss Jocelyn, the lady who lived in the big, big, *fine* house; without doubt, Miss Jocelyn would take care of her.

"And what about Jasmine?" persisted Clem. Agnes was to seek her out and, when possible, live near her—maybe in the house as her little maid. But Jasmine was never to know that Clem was her mother; and Mr. Philip Brown was never to know—nobody, ever. And when no more money came for Jasmine, it would be supposed that the "rich cousin" had grown indifferent, or was dead.

It was a moonless night, but unclouded, and although the lights in the ballroom were out, Agnes was sorry Clem wasn't smaller as she led the way toward the barrel-corner. She was fearfully dis-

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

tinct as she took a plank from the ground, laid it across two barrels, and lifted upon the improvised platform an empty barrel inverted. And when Clem mounted upon the platform she couldn't help making noises.

“Come on,” Clem whispered, but Agnes couldn't reach high enough to draw herself up. Then the order came, “Let yourself go limber!” So she made herself as limp as possible, and Clem drew her steadily up until her feet were on the board. Then the giantess, with much more caution than before, climbed upon the empty barrel and again said, “Let yourself go limber!”

Agnes realized that if Clem didn't stand very flat upon her feet it would be the worse for them both, but she let herself go limber till her heels caught over the iron rim at the bottom.

“Now,” said Clem, “I've got to lift you up—go as stiff as you can, for you're to catch the hook over the edge of the fence.”

Agnes looked above her and thought that it could never be done; besides, it was much harder to go stiff than to go limber, and when Clem took her by the legs and began pushing her upward, the only way she could help was to press her palms against the planks. But at last her feet were set squarely upon the other's broad shoulders, and the iron ring-and-hook to which the ladder was fastened, was pushed slowly up until she could grasp it. The rope

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

was new, so Agnes could push it up along the fence for some distance above her head, but every time the hook was almost over the top, it would slip back, and every time it did, it made a noise.

“Keep trying,” Clem said calmly, though pains like needles were darting down her shoulder blades, and her back was beginning to quiver from the strain. “Keep trying, Aggie, this is the only chance.”

The hook rattled against the fence and an upstairs window was suddenly thrown open; then shutters banged against the wall. The hook swung close to Clem’s head in its fall, but she only said in that steady, all-cheering voice, “Keep trying, Aggie, keep trying!”

Up went the hook again, and this time it didn’t fall back, so Clem knew it had caught over the edge. Agnes whispered, “God fixed it; I couldn’t.”

“Climb up as quick as you can”—for Clem’s splendid strength was about to fail. From the opened window suddenly shot a shaft of blinding light, flashing along the dingy pavement of the court. It crawled up the stone wall to the plank fence and up, up like a living eye—and rested upon the little girl clinging desperately to the top, and the giantess striving to reach her by way of the swaying rope-ladder.

As savage oaths rang from across the court, Clem drew herself to the edge, swung the ladder on

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

the far side, climbed over. At the same time the basement door was flung open. A man's harsh voice was heard—"Wiggles! Wiggles! There they are!"

Clem was on the ladder high above the alley that skirted the court. "Aggie—put your arms about my neck and just let yourself go."

Agnes was so terrified that she could hardly move—she heard men running in the court, she heard somebody say, "Bring a ladder!"—and she imagined she could see, in the open window, the hideous face of the mistress of the house of thieves. But when her arms were tight about Clem's neck, her blood began to warm her again and she panted, "Good thing I got you, Clem!"

When they had reached the alley, Clem took her in her arms as if she weighed nothing at all, and began running—how she did run! The wind beat Agnes' hair about her ears, but for all that she could hear Clem's breathing, it sounded so quick, so loud, so desperate. Almost at once, it seemed, somebody could be heard running behind them—a man, two—maybe three—and how *they* did run!

They were nearing the head of the alley which dived under a sprawling tenement before it reached the thoroughfare, and Agnes, staring straight ahead, looked through the stone arch, which served as a frame for a fairy picture of dim light, houses remote and lifeless like houses of cardboard, and

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

an empty street car drawn like a toy painting across a toy sky. Then, very suddenly, there was a vicious report, and Clem staggered, shuddered down upon her knees, opened her arms—and lay prostrate. The light from the dusty globe that swung in the roof of the arch showed only shadows and flittering black forms in the farther spaces of the alley, but it cast a mellow radiance over the bleeding woman and the shrieking child.

The first policeman said she was dead, and the second agreed that the shot in her back had done the work. But Agnes, on her knees, with her arms about the still form cried, “You ain’t dead, *are* you, Clem!”

And Clem whispered, “No.”

The first officer blew his whistle, and after a while—to Agnes a very long while—the ambulance came; but when the man in white looked closely at Clem he thought they had better not lift her just yet, so she lay very still, her head on the child’s lap. Clem had a great deal she wished to say, but dared not speak, because when she did she choked, and there was blood; and, anyway, what was the use now? Agnes knew where to go—and Clem knew pretty well that she herself was about to go away.

“Are you there . . . Aggie?”

“Oh, *Clem!*” As if she could be anywhere else!

Presently the faint voice—so strangely faint to be Clem’s voice—as faint as that of a little child—

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

"I did pray once . . . at the last; you remember? If there's any chance for me . . . I owe it all . . . to you. Pray for me now . . . Aggie, darling."

Agnes, who did not understand that Clem was about to go away, tried to steady her voice as she murmured, "Dear God, see how Clem is hurt getting me away from that house of thieves and got me that Bible and taught me to read it. And don't You forget she prayed to You once. And if she hadn't taken care of me five years, where'd I be now?"

After a pause Clem whispered, "And little Jasmine."

"Oh, yes, God, and because she stayed where she knew it was a wicked place this was why, because she wanted her little girl raised to be good and learn to sing and know things and be a fine lady."

A longer pause, then—"Tell Him if I had . . . my life to live over . . ."

"Clem, it'd mean a lots more to Him, if you'd tell Him, yourself."

Clem hesitated, and though her lips moved, no sound issued from them. Then she breathed very, very faintly, "Father of the helpless . . ."

Agnes murmured her old-time entreaty, so familiar to this recounter of marvelous tales. "G'on, Clem!"

Clem tried again—"Father of the helpless . . ."
Then there burst from her spontaneously the heart-

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

felt prayer of long ago—"O God, have mercy upon me, a sinner!"

The man in white raised Agnes gently and turned her head away. "You may place the body in the ambulance, men," he told the officers.

For Clem had left the Bad Lands.

XXIII

AGNES MEETS AN OLD FRIEND

WITH her hand in that of the tall policeman, Agnes was led away in quest of the address Clem had given.

"I'm not going to cry," she declared, knowing that tall policemen scorn tears.

He was sorry for himself to be forced to take a little girl through the tortuous alleys of the Bad Lands—but he was sorry for her, too; and when she did cry—at the sudden, heart-rending thought, "*Clem is dead!*" she couldn't help it—he rebuked her without anger.

"You mustn't," he said; "it don't do the least good on earth." And the reason was so convincing that she didn't do it except when she forgot the argument.

After five years of being shut up in the house of thieves, the narrow streets seemed to her wonderfully roomy, and over such courts as they traversed, courts like Old Shady, but unknown to her, the sky was enormous. She was such a tiny speck to be in the great black outdoors, that if the policeman

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

hadn't been tall she must have screamed aloud from fright, whereupon the lady in the fine clothes, eyes flashing fire, and mouth baring gums, must certainly have pounced upon her from any doorway.

"Oh, I'm glad I've got you!" Agnes cried, tightening her grasp; which pleased the tall policeman for some reason connected, doubtless, with a cradle at home and a towhead that shouted joyfully when a blue coat with shiny buttons came through the passage.

That tall policeman knew the way so well that he didn't pause to give Agnes a chance to think of anything except how far they were going, 'until there wasn't any farther to go. They had stopped in front of a flattened building with thrust-out supports, like the extended legs of a fat spider, and with two glaring eyes of fire fixed upon Agnes in a way to make her blink. At first she was sure the policeman had made a mistake, for above the first eye, serving as a sort of bristling eyebrow, was this legend, in raised letters:

**"COME IN IF YOU ARE THIRSTY AND TRY OUR BEST
BEER, ONLY 4C."**

But she knew they were at the right place when above the second eye, she read:

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

“COME IN IF YOU ARE THIRSTY: PARTAKE OF THE
WATER OF LIFE FREELY.”

If she could only have shown that to Clem! She had the smothered feeling that everything new and wonderful in her life should be shown Clem—and tried not to sob. “It’s so joyful,” she gasped apologetically. “But I’m going to be all right.”

The eye winked open and they were in a room which, despite its public character, had a home-like air. The frames of the mirrors and pictures were as beautiful as those in any saloon, and the lights were as bright. On a counter a nickel-plated coffee-urn, pretending to be silver, smoked boastfully, and the stacks of heavy plates beside it, and the rows of cups and saucers seemed saying thickly, “You *can’t* break us!”

Among those eating at the counter was a bent old woman who sewed from morning till midnight, day after day, and another was a “sandhog,” just in from his night-shift—how well Agnes knew the types! Mottoes were everywhere, even on the cups and saucers, lines taken from the Scriptures; and on a small stand-table was a gilt-edged Bible, reminding her of the one left in the house of thieves.

The towering, powerfully-built man behind the counter who had just served the aged seamstress a smoking cup of coffee, said, in response to her faintly murmured acknowledgment:

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

“Don’t thank me. I wouldn’t be at this work if the Lord wasn’t behind the business. You just thank Him, it’s all the pay we ask for at this joint.”

The burly worker from the caissons glanced at the emaciated woman and growled, “Shame for you to have to wear yourself out all your life and get nothing for it. Something’s wrong with the Government, by——”

“None of that,” the waiter interposed. “The only point is this: can she stitch away for thirty cents a day, and love God? Better wages coming by-and-by.” Then his eyes met those of Agnes’, questioningly.

Her pale face suddenly glowed. “It’s Alley Jim!” she cried ecstatically. “It’s Alley Jim that wasn’t ever downed!”

At first he couldn’t think who she was, and even after the tall policeman had explained, he was enabled to place her, not because of the night in his cellar, or because he had been laid up in the hospital on her account, but because, a day or two ago, he had been talking to her father.

She was not glad to know that her father was living in the next block, indeed, the information made slight impression; what overshadowed everything was that Jim was not so glad to see her as she was to see him. Her disappointment was too keen to pass unnoticed. So often had she imagined how it would be should they meet—the outcry, the warm

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

handclasp, the beaming eye—that it dazed her to find themselves face to face like chance acquaintances, not even shaking hands.

He was greatly disconcerted by the quiver of her lips. "Since you knew me," he explained, "I've got to be Mr. Philip Brown's right-hand man in this help-work, so I'm a public character. A public character has got to distribute his kind feelings so everybody can claim a share. You being shut up in that den for five years put your feelings to growing rank like 'taters in a cellar, but I got nothing to be special over, I dassent concentrate on nobody because I'm a public character, public and practical. Come along with me, and I'll take you to Mr. Brown, for you don't belong to my department."

"I'll leave you, then," said the policeman, finding Agnes thus conveniently classified, "and find out if they've caught any of those rascals in your 'house of thieves'—though I doubt it exceedingly. Be good to yourself," he patted Agnes on the head. "Mr. Brown owns this place, and's a millionaire besides, and he'll make your fortune for you, for he's got a religion that makes him give away what he's got."

"It ain't his religion," retorted Alley Jim, thrusting out his lower jaw as if Agnes were an argument instead of a very bewildered, disappointed and unhappy little girl, "to make nobody's fortune. We don't lift nobody up in our work, we help 'em in the level they're on. We bring God to 'em, where

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

they've put themselves. We've nothing to do with changing folks from low to high, we just smooth the ground for 'em where they're *at*, and if they ever get higher, they got to do their own climbing. No, sir, Mr. Brown will leave Agnes right where he finds her, except to teach her to use such tools as she's got."

Then to Agnes—"Come along!" while she wondered uneasily about her tools. With quick steps, such as became a public character, who must take a great many more before daybreak, he led her, almost as if she were his prisoner, to a rear door, on whose frosted glass was engraved:

**"JUST A LITTLE RESTING PLACE ON THE ROADSIDE
OF LIFE."**

"Here's your department," Alley Jim announced, leading her within. There were perhaps a dozen old women and decrepit men dozing in arm-chairs, but Jim did not find the man he sought. On the desk lay a note saying that Mr. Philip Brown had been called unexpectedly out of the city and for a week everything was left in the assistant's care.

"Everything," Jim repeated practically, after having read the note aloud. "That includes *you*, Agnes. My order is for you to lie down on this divan, draw this robe over you, and try to catch up

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

with your sleep. Everything may seem dark and uncertain to you now; but all you got to do is to close your eyes and keep 'em closed till the morning's a-shining through the window. And don't think. To-morrow I know what's to happen, but I won't tell you now, because I don't want you to think. You're going to be all right, and whenever you think you ain't, just say to yourself, 'I ain't never died yet,' you say to yourself. Good-by to you; and bear this in mind—it ain't because things is things that we're glad or dubious, it's according to whether we see 'em in the dark or by daylight. Sleep out your troubles, there's no other way so soft and genial to get shed of 'em."

At first Agnes could not keep her eyes off the blotched and half-famished faces nodding jerkily in the chairs, or keep from following the clink of glass and rattle of dishes and the aggressively cheerful voice of Alley Jim from the other side of the partition. Her disappointment over Jim was less than that over the absence of the man who stood in with God. A week of waiting, a whole week made up of seven interminable periods, each swelled to twenty-four hours! How could a little girl wait so long? . . . And Clem was dead! . . .

She didn't believe she could ever go to sleep again, surrounded by those ghastly human wrecks, her ears filled with strange and startling sounds from without. But presently the sounds were all blended into

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

a soothing murmur, and from the human wrecks she floated easily away, out on a sea of unconsciousness; and on that sea she drifted quietly through the night with never a sail in sight, till the sun was streaming from a cloudless sky.

Coming thus suddenly to port, she found herself surrounded by the battered hulls of other outworn men and women, their faces unfamiliar. Alley Jim's voice no longer was to be heard expounding the mission's philosophy, for in the outer room the day-man was serving at the counter. But the world was not altogether strange, for a voice Agnes knew better than Jim's, was ringing in her ears——

"Here we are, Aggie, we've come for you!"

XXIV

THE HAY MA'S DAUGHTER

SO much had Jenny Tildy changed during the past five years, that, without her voice as a clew, Agnes would not have recognized the tall, lean, wiry young woman in the rocking-chair. Agnes had the impression that her factory friend had sprung up in a single night, therefore couldn't be finished; that her young-lady look wasn't there to stay, that her long dress was a make-believe, and her air of taking herself seriously was something of a joke. Every crinkle of the sallow skin was different from the crinkles made in talking by the girl of thirteen, yet there was the same determined cut of the chin, also the same nasal tone-quality that quickly brought Agnes' impressions of the daughter of the "Hay Ma" up to date. And then life's joke lost its point, as usually happens when one loses his perspective.

Jenny Tildy was not alone. Her "we" included a man who had changed little since the hospital days.

"I warned you," Mr. Earle cried harshly, turning his sightless face toward the divan, "to keep out

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

of your stepmother's clutches. Now see what's happened to you, and you my child, to bring me lower than I've ever been before! What do you think can be done for you, *now*? There's an end to you—you're finished, you're flung into the waste-heap.” He muttered dull curses, his helpless anger drawing his deeply-burned scars into creases of repulsive ferocity.

“You keep out of this!” Jenny Tildy exclaimed, in a tone so masterful that Agnes looked at her father, to find if he would stand it. “You let Aggie tell all she's been through, so we'll know what to go on. I never start nothing till I know what to go on.”

“I'm crushed,” muttered Mr. Earle, drawing his forehead into a knot, till the skin grew blood-red. “I'm crushed!”

“Then don't be forgetting it,” retorted Jenny Tildy. “Now, not another word from you till you're called on. Go ahead, Aggie, tell us the truth and all of it there is.”

Agnes looked from face to face, marveling that her father should ever have been brought to such a pass of subjection, and that Jenny Tildy could regard her escape from the house of thieves so calmly.

“I got to treat him firm,” Jenny Tildy explained. “I keep him fed well and I don't want him never to forget where the victuals come from, for somebody's

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

always got to keep the upper hand, and he ain't capable; he's proved it more times than one."

"Oh," sighed Agnes, "I used to think if I ever got away from that awful place, somebody'd be glad to see me—maybe Alley Jim, and you, and Winsie—even father. But nobody cares, do they!"

"It's this way," Jenny Tildy explained; "everybody feels they's enough of 'em before you come. But when Alley Jim told me, this morning, about you, I says to your pa, 'We got to take her in, I reckon——' and we must, and we will. Now you go ahead and tell us all you've been through, so we'll know what to go on. Paint it black, don't spare nobody's feelings. I'm always looking for the worst, thank God, and ready to go halfway to meet it, and I ain't never been caught napping yet."

Then Agnes began at the beginning and told all. Gradually, as she proceeded, a change came over her father's face, a change so remarkable, that several times she paused uneasily; but Jenny Tildy would say briskly, "Don't pay no attention to *him*—g'on." Then Agnes, reminded of the many times she had said "g'on" to Clem, would go on unsteadily, drying her tears.

After Jenny Tildy had asked many questions, her face became wonderfully like the face of five years ago, and the snappiness of her tones and the abrupt jerkings of arms and head were as a once-familiar

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

picture obscured for a time by the dust of forgetfulness. When everything was told—the loungers in the room, meantime, paying no heed to the low murmur of voices—Agnes knew that she had passed from one friend to another, from Clem to Jenny Tildy, and that all she need do was to fit herself like a garment to the new friend's angles and lines, being loose when it didn't matter, and tight when Jenny Tildy was tight.

But her father she did not understand. And when he got up abruptly and groped his way forward to lay his hand upon her shoulder, she paled with apprehension.

“It's a miracle!” he gasped. “My God, it's a miracle!” Perhaps he wanted to take her into his arms; perhaps if she had raised her hand to his disfigured face he would have melted to the tenderness of his better self. But she was afraid until he fell back in his chair, hiding his face with trembling hands; and she was glad Jenny Tildy, sharp-eyed and capable, was there to interpose between her and her father.

After a deep silence, Jenny Tildy spoke abruptly, her manner suggesting that not being able to do justice to the wonderful story of the house of thieves, she was obliged to leave it where Agnes had left it:

“A few words, Aggie, to give you something to go on. When your pa got out of the hospital, I

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

says to my hay ma, ‘Here’s a chance for me to chuck the factory before I’m ground to a powder and blowed away. I’ll get ’im a cheap fiddle,’ says I, ‘and I’ll be his little gal passing around the tin cup while he plays “Home, Sweet Home.” I’ll make them blind eyes count,’ says I, ‘feeding him plain but copious. He needs me and I need him, which if that ain’t the basis of real pardnership, none known. Of course, he’s going to find me a Prohibition Party, but not more so than the poorhouse would be, and greater freedom of leg and change of victuals.’ My old hay ma didn’t say nothing, that being one of her ways that made of her such a valuable parent, but I see she looked willing, so I give her a poke in the side and bids her good-by. I been touring the streets with Mr. Earle ever since, but when Alley Jim said you’d bobbed up, I felt it my duty to come to offer you a daughter’s part in this here legacy.”

Again Mr. Earle started to his feet, but now he spoke in guarded tones: “We must go away at once—we must leave this accursed city. They’ll never rest day or night till they get Agnes—and the next time’ll be her last. We must get her away, Jenny, we must save her while we can. They’ll bring her forward as a witness, and that gang—I know ’em—they’ll keep track of her—you couldn’t any more save her if they get their fangs on her than God could save the devil from hell.” In spite

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

of his low voice, there was a frenzy of terror in the words that chilled Agnes to the heart.

“You’re right,” Jenny Tildy whispered. “Not even Alley Jim must know till we’re gone—I’ll write to him, when we’re safe away. The policemen didn’t find a soul at that house when they made their raid last night. I bet you the gang’s hunting for Aggie this minute, and you can be sure they’re watching this joint!”

“They’d never get her if I had my eyesight,” he groaned in fierce helplessness. “Come—come—lead me—how can we slip away unseen? After all that time in their vile den, five years—five long years . . . and unharmed, untouched—my God, it’s a miracle! Saved from those devils by one of themselves! Jenny,” he caught her arm imploringly, “won’t you take care of us?”

“I’ll go this minute for your fiddle and what few things I have, and we’ll put out.”

“Out into the country!” he begged, “the fields—lanes—little villages, where nobody’d think of looking.”

“Where the green grass grows everywhere?” Agnes asked, her eyes sparkling. “Oh, won’t it be joyful!” And she had a secret vision of their way leading over flowers and between fragrant hedges to the town where Jasmine lived.

XXV

HAY-DREAMS

ON a distant hilltop, Jenny Tildy and Agnes paused for a last look at the city. Without turning his head, stopping because they had stopped, Mr. Earle leaned heavily upon his cane, to ease the violin which, in oilskin case, hung from his shoulder. With sightless eyes full upon the morning sun, his huddled form was symbolic of the blind soul within for which the world was bright in vain.

"Good-by to ye," Jenny Tildy called to the sparkling spires and pillars of smoke: "if I never see you again, you won't care, and *that* ain't all. Tell it good-by, Aggie."

"Good-by, City," Agnes' sweet girl's-voice sounded a clear bird-note in its high register—"Good-by, Clem, I won't ever forget!"

They passed over the hill, and the sunbeams turned into brilliants the dew on drooping grass-blades, and the dew in Agnes' eyes. Now at last she felt herself to be on the way to Jasmine's, and already was wondering how she could persuade Jenny Tildy to seek out Bellby—wherever Bellby

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

might be—without betraying the great secret. Maybe they would meet somebody from there; maybe somebody would speak the name, whereupon she would say . . . or possibly if she mentioned it herself, it might not occur to them to inquire how she had ever heard of such a place. For the present, at any rate, she did not object when Jenny Tildy remarked:

“This is what I call being a free man! There ain’t one place on earth we’re tied down to more’n another. We got the whole of it to pick and choose from, mountains and meadows, north and south—why! it makes us feel that the world belongs to us same as to the birds. Long ago I’d have started out if your pa’d been willing to leave town.”

John Earle did not conceal his desperate anxiety to get Agnes as far from the city as possible, though hitherto he had manifested little anxious thought for any one. As if unable to comprehend how Agnes had passed pure and unscarred through her years of imprisonment, he had her repeat her experiences again and again, listening always with the dazed expression of one hearing marvels. No one could have doubted the truth of that narrative, it was so simple, so direct, so filled with little things through which a white light seemed shining as the child of perfect faith touched one after the other.

While Agnes and Jenny Tildy were chatting gaily along the highroad, bursting into song inspired even

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

by the lace-shadows of weeds between the wagon-ruts, his air of bewilderment lay heavily upon him. Why was Agnes as she was, after twelve years in the Bad Lands, and why should he who had dragged her there, care whether she were lost or saved? He did not attempt to account for her miraculous rescue, nor did he acknowledge that within himself a spring, long hidden and untouched, had changed the current of his being.

Nevertheless, from the chaos of his thought-dust, the dawning light of purpose took form; since he alone was responsible for her subjection to fearful dangers, any virtue that might remain in his wasted life should be devoted to her happiness. It was impossible, he felt, for anything to save *him* from the sordid fate of his own creating, but it was not too late to save his child.

At the sound of approaching wheels he was distressed, and whenever they met pedestrians, whether ragged tramps or well-to-do farmers driving their hogs or cattle, he turned upon them his discolored face with its darkest forbidding frown. He was spared the curious glances cast from him to tall, ungainly Jenny Tildy marching forward under her heavy pack, then at Agnes, her small head engulfed in a huge sunbonnet. However, no one sought to attach himself to the dusty group, for the helplessness of blindness threatens too great a drain on one's sympathies, to say nothing of one's means, and even

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

tramps quickened their sluggish feet at sight of the blank eyes.

Persuaded that the "gang" would search for Agnes far from the city, they skirted the towns on their way, stopping only in obscure nooks to rest, eating from the stores of Jenny Tildy's pack, hurrying on, defiant of heat and weariness. But in spite of anxiety, which lessened with every mile, the escaped prisoner felt a buoyant happiness not to be tempered by physical aches. Trees, wild flowers, bird-songs and dappled sky—Agnes found all enchanting. Her dreams of meadows and woods were so much smaller than the reality, that she would never be able to crawl back into them. A single clump of rosebushes, a hillside glimpsed through swinging vines, the touch of a fragrant breeze on her heated forehead, the darting of rabbits across the road, and the short-distance flight of quails, were all bigger than she had room for in her tenement-house of imaginings.

At night they slipped into a barn for shelter, so deliciously weary that the hay would have gained nothing from springs and a mattress. Even John Earle, always taciturn and gloomy-browed, breathed an involuntary sigh of content, as the balmy July breeze swept through the hay-strewn loft.

When his heavy breathing signaled that they could talk freely, Jenny Tildy whispered huskily to Agnes, "Girl, this is the life!" She stretched out

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

luxuriously, and as the heavy breathing continued, she spoke with more assurance. “None higher, I say, while it lasts, but we got to remember that God tacked winter on the end of the calendar. Reach your hand over and feel of my dress. Lined with paper, did ycu say? Well, yes. Put your head closer, so I can drop a few words in your ear without spilling ’em on your pa—Listen: it’s paper-money! What do you think of having a dress lined with dollar-bills, uh? I guess you’ll never think after this that I ain’t dressed in style. Why, bless your heart, that kind of garment’s always in fashion!”

“Oh, Jenny Tildy! What can you do with it?”

“I’m going to do something with it as wonderful as *it* is—and nothing’s wonderfuller than money.”

“I think,” murmured Agnes drowsily, “that the yellow eyes of Spanish Needles are wonderfuller, when you see ’em in the ragweeds.” She ran her hand over the other’s skirt. “My, but you’ve got lots and lots!”

“And you’ll have your share, for it’s mostly made out of your old man. But if he ever finds out we’ve got it—listen, Aggie, don’t you go to sleep on me!—if he does, it’ll ruin all. Only way I’ve been able to keep him from drinking himself into the horrors is to make believe I haven’t got the price of a drink. Tell you what I’m saving for. Always wanted to run a restaurant—a little restaurant by a depot in

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

a small town. I ain't settled on the spot, and I don't aim to locate it too hasty. Besides, they ain't money enough yet to buy the shack I see in my mind's eye."

"Once I heard of a place I'd like to go to. . . ."

"Lots of places like that. Now in the morning we got to begin working your pa for all he's worth, which ain't much except in the music line, though as to giving a front to two young girls roaming the world prospecting for a railroad-restaurant, he beats my old hay ma. But ain't he the limit on the frozen tongue, though! He's just naturally paralyzed over your getting through your troubles with none of 'em sticking to your feet. He's dead superstitious, and looks to me as if he's beginning to get a glimmer that there might be some truth in what you used to talk about—you know what I mean, it's nothing to converse over."

"God?" asked Agnes gently.

"Yes—and all that. And when we've wore him out fiddling, if we haven't saved up enough by that time, I'll hire out as a servant."

"So will I," Agnes murmured, "a maid to—to somebody nice."

"I'm going to be a real servant," Jenny Tildy declared inflexibly, "and let 'em call me so if they want to. I won't ask for a seat in the front room, nor to eat at table, nor to be called 'Miss Jenny.' Won't be nothing *but* a hired girl. Kid, believe me, folks is going to pay high for a girl that don't ask

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

to take none of her wages out in being a lady. Then, when my pile's made, I'll tell 'em fare-you-well, and open up my little railroad-restaurant, and run it to glory."

Agnes fell asleep dreaming that her part in adding to the "pile" had already been assumed; she was engaged as lady's-maid; and her mistress who, of course, lived in Bellby, was Clem's daughter.

XXVI

THE SONG THAT KEPT ALIVE

THE next day, in the only business street of a straggling village, John Earle played the violin, Jenny Tildy held the oilskin case and proffered rosin from time to time, and Agnes passed the same tin cup from which later they slaked their thirst at a roadside brook.

In the days that followed, that famous cup proved expert in catching silvery showers as well as sparkling jets from moss-rimmed springs. Their travels were marked by few adventures; nor did Agnes desire a change, for she was very happy. The weather was ideal, the landscape always wonderful, their earnings sufficient.

Rosy mornings, shady noons, and evenings of cowbell-tinklings and breaths of cooling earth, gave place to star-dusted nights. Woods, and pasture-lands with their red and white checkerboard-squares of cattle and sheep, and fields of ripe grain, linked town to town. The world seemed to fall into line naturally just for the purpose of defiling past the blind musician, and whether the feet of strangers quickened to escape the melodies of necessity, or

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

pity-softened glances claimed him as a neighbor, still the cup rattled to slender coins.

No doubt the coins would have been as slender even had a trumpet instead of delicious harmonies called to the street-crowds, "See the blind man?" For all that, the music was worth the money. On rare occasions a unit in this procession of life would pause, become an individual with appreciation for the performer's skill, ask questions, and give, with his pennies, something of himself in brief companionship.

Once an old man, himself an expert player before the loss of his arm, took all three home with him, feasted them in a large but solitary house, and after John Earle had played far into the night for his sole enjoyment, led them to beds that mocked the rising sun. That was something to remember truly, something that might happen again any day—only, it never did—it made their borrowed lodgings beside haystacks, in outhouses, or, at best, the cheapest hotels, seem but temporary hardships to be succeeded by oases of snowy sheets, and cool-smelling rooms with vines whispering at the window.

"Looks like," Jenny Tildy remarked a week or so after the great event, "the nicest things in life are the things that never happen again, only you think they may. Lord, I found out ages ago that you can make your coffee sweet if you can just

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

taste the sugar that ain't in it! And say, Aggie, you notice how now and again somebody makes over your pa's music as if he was in a show? I guess there's more in his playing than drawing nickels; wonder how he come by it?"

"Maybe he plays what he can't see," Agnes suggested.

In forming their plans for the morrow, John Earle was inevitably drawn into animated conferences and at last his taciturnity was definitely cast aside, like a disguising garment. He began revealing himself gradually, first showing that he could smile, then that he could make others laugh.

"Why, good gracious, Aggie!" Jenny Tildy one day exclaimed, "*your* pa ain't no hay ma! There's a soul in his straw-wrappings!" Her surprise was that of one who has not observed the processes of revolution, and wakes up suddenly to find Independence a fact. "There are *three* of us. The old man has come alive!"

The bird-chattering of the young people had indeed reminded him of his long-forgotten spring. His form grew more erect, his step lost its shuffling weight, sometimes his face was cheerful. And when he whistled unconsciously along country lanes, or hummed old songs as they sat about their gypsy meal, Jenny Tildy would wink at Agnes to take no notice.

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

When it developed that as a youth he had wandered much in the woods, they brought him leaves and blossoms to feel and smell, asking the names of trees and flowers. "When I was a boy . . ." and he talked about hunting, boating and swimming. . . . "When I was a boy——" How it made Agnes' blood tingle the first time she heard that phrase on his lips! It made her feel so close to him that she ventured to slip her hand into his, nor did he draw away. He sighed deeply, it is true, but the quick autumn breath did not bring a change of weather, and when he stroked her hair, murmuring sadly, "What a life for you, what a life, poor child!" she felt so sorry for him that her heart glowed with thrilling warmth.

"Oh, father, everything is so dear since you began telling us about the flowers!"

For the more he spoke of woods and fields, the smoother grew his scarred brow. His dazed bewilderment over the escape of the child from a life of shame had given way to exultation. He no longer muttered, "It's a miracle, it's a miracle!" but played little airs of thanksgiving, almost smothering them in mad extravaganzas of cascading variations. To whom were his thanks given?

"It wasn't God!" he cried out one day, abruptly, with fierce defiance. "I say it wasn't! Why should He interfere to save you when He's letting thousands of young girls go to the devil every year?"

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

Jenny Tildy suggested, “I guess it was Clem that did the trick.”

Whereupon Agnes murmured softly, “And there wasn’t ever but one Clem.”

Those July skies continued cloudless, and when the girls suggested that they buy fishing-tackle and learn to fish at the next creek on their way, the musician consented willingly, even eagerly. Agnes, who had imagined that life couldn’t hold any more enjoyment, found—at the next creek—a great deal more poured in without any spilling over since life has a way of stretching to hold all you can put in it. After that came other fishing-days, with the frying of fish over embers in the woods, and many little wistful recitals beginning with, “When I was a boy. . . .”

And one evening as they entered a larger town than usual, and passed as quickly as possible along a street of fine houses which made them look much dingier than in the country where weeds are not out of place——

“Stop!” John Earle exclaimed excitedly; and they stood still on the pavement with the well-dressed passers-by staring at them curiously. A window was wide open and young voices joining in a song, floated past the lace curtains to mingle with the sound of street-traffic. When the song was ended they passed on. “What did you think of it?” he asked, breathlessly.

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

“It was pretty nice, I guess,” said Jenny Tildy, “but we oughtn’t to be wasting our time, it’s getting dark.”

After a long silence, he said, as if unable longer to withhold the fact, “That was one of my songs—I wrote it when I was only twenty. . . . To think of voices singing it to-day, voices so young, so fresh and sweet, as if there were no sorrow and crime in the world?”

“Did you make any money out of it?” inquired Jenny Tildy, now impressed.

“Oh, father!” Agnes exclaimed. “I guess God kept it alive for you to hear again. Ain’t it wonderful!—ain’t *everything!*”

“It is wonderful.” He no longer showed his old bitterness when she referred to God, for he was seldom harsh or gloomy, these days. It was as if in talking about the flowers, his voice caught and held something of their perfume.

XXVII

THE STORM

SUCH days, such days!" Agnes chanted.
"They won't last," Jenny Tildy predicted.
"Talk about 'golden days,' there's no such things;
they're only gold-plated and it washes off mighty
quick."

In fact, they did not last. In permitting himself to drop back to reminiscences of boyhood, John Earle could not pull himself up to the present without passing through certain events against whose recollection he had fought since Agnes was a baby. It was after a particularly light-hearted day followed by a night of dreamless sleep, that he found himself engulfed in blackest despair. He remembered all, not in the sense in which memory had haunted him in the heart of the Bad Lands, but with a poignant keenness that stabbed at his side, cutting off his breath——

Whisky!—he must have it now, *now*, and all he could drink. What had become of the money he alone had earned? They were saving it to buy fine dresses, fine shoes, they who should go in rags, bare-

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

foot, rather than let him but for an hour suffer the agonies of the damned. Many times since his hospital days his thirst had come upon him like a devil tearing him, but helpless in Jenny Tildy's firm hands he had been forced to submission.

Now it was different. Like a fool he had let himself taste pure delights, and the awakening found him facing a hideous abyss. "Get it for me," he cried hoarsely, "get it for me quick or I'll—I'll *kill you!*" He held Agnes' arm in a frenzied grip, not knowing which girl writhed under his cruel fingers, not caring; suddenly both had become his enemies.

Their expostulations, their tones of persuasion, of passionate entreaty, caused him to shout like a madman, drowning their words. Agnes felt as if her arm were breaking, but her greatest suffering came from realizing that he had reverted to the father of Old Shady Court.

"Will you get it for me, will you—or must I strangle you? I've got to have it, I've got to have it, I tell you, I know what I'm saying, I've got to HAVE it. . . ." And as he swayed her back and forth, at times almost striking her against the ground, he cursed frantically, his oaths, commands and threats mingling in an incoherent stream of breathless fury.

It was not until Jenny Tildy stole on tiptoe behind him and suddenly grasped his arms, twisting them, that Agnes was set free. With a maniacal

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

scream, he rushed at them, both fists uplifted, his face a red and purple terror. Only let him get his hands upon them, they would do as he wished, or——

Not knowing directions, he rushed through an open gateway and ran round and round in a level pasture, fancying he was hurrying forward, and mistaking the sound of his feet in the grass for the rustle of fleeing skirts. The ground was uneven, but with fists relaxed to outstretched palms he ran on and on, stumbling, falling, picking himself up with oaths, always raving. He was nobody's slave, he wouldn't go with them another step unless they brought him liquor whenever he wanted it—and he knew when it was good for him, he knew when he must have it, *MUST!* Jenny Tildy had the violin in charge—give it to him, give it that he might smash it to bits, yes, if he starved for it!

At last, bruised and exhausted, crying out in a sobbing voice of self-pity, “Blind, blind!” he flung himself upon the ground and lay there quivering as with the ague. Agnes, wringing her hands but not daring to breathe audibly lest he discover her position, watched the miserable figure in dumb helplessness, while Jenny Tildy, holding her hand, stood alert for flight should he start up to renew the pursuit. They waited long in sickening suspense, every moment fearing discovery from the road, or interference from the distant farmhouse. Perhaps the family was away on a Sunday visit—no one came,

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

or appeared at door or window; no one passed the open gate. The half-crazed man, the terrified child, the young woman standing on guard, were seen only by the cattle in an adjoining field which moved slowly up to the fence, pressing stolidly against each other in their fixed gazing.

When it seemed certain that John Earle would not move, Jenny Tildy nodded toward a huge cottonwood tree at some distance from the prostrate figure, and they crept thither to sit in its shade, talking presently in whispers. The sun glared so fiercely upon the unprotected man that after a long time Agnes ventured to approach him—"Papa, won't you sit with us where it's nice and cool?" But he only snarled something she did not understand and remained with hands convulsively gripped, eyes closed, form pressed to the earth.

Jenny Tildy called, "The sun'll make you sick, you staying there in them smartweeds——" but it was no use, and when the two partook of their dinner of cheese and crackers, dried beef and peanut-butter, he refused to move.

"He'll die," Agnes whispered in great distress.

But Jenny Tildy ate with relish, praising the music of the breeze in the overhanging branches. "It's like sitting under a waterfall and not getting wet," she declared. "And the day's so awful hot, it's nice just to hear treetops playing they're water."

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

“But, Jenny Tildy,” Agnes persisted aloud, “if he won’t eat, he’ll die.”

“Let ’im,” cried Jenny Tildy, doubtless for his benefit. “He don’t get no whisky while I’m a-living. We all gotta die some day and if his time has come, he can thank us for being on hand to bury ’im. If he’s set on it, let ’im go ahead, for he’s keeping us waiting.”

The air grew more sultry. Even the waterfall in the cottonwood tree could not modify its oppressiveness. In the afternoon, clouds began to form in the west. Rapidly overlapping, heaping themselves up, they towered to the zenith in black mountains with dazzling snow-crests. The snow melted and, losing brilliancy, poured down the east in an inky flood. The cloud-mountains grew volcanic with subterranean mutterings and flashings of fire.

John Earle sat up and lifted his sightless face to heaven. Terrific claps of thunder followed each other with frightful rapidity, crashes beating into subsiding roars in jarring collisions. To those who could see, the pasture was a pulsing flame; to him who could not see, it was filled with the voice of awful vengeance.

“I am afraid, I am afraid,” he quavered with the piteousness of a child. “My God, I’m afraid—Agnes!”—He stretched out his arms imploringly.

“Here we are,” they ran to him, and Jenny Tildy gasped, “We are afraid, too. It’s come on so

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

quick—where could it have come from—oh, oh. . . .”

All three clung together, saying over and over that there had never been so fearful a storm. The rain and wind, instead of putting out the lightning, added to its terror. John Earle, clinging to Agnes with one arm and with his other hand clutching Jenny Tildy, repeated wildly over and over that he was afraid. Sometimes the thunder blotted out the words, sometimes they came brokenly between thunder claps,—“My God, I am afraid! . . .”

Suddenly there came a crack quick and clean as if a pin had pricked their eardrums, and the cottonwood tree was shattered to its base. Jenny Tildy, who had been urging them to run under the tree for protection from the torrential rain, stood rooted to the spot.

“Don’t leave me,” moaned John Earle, grasping them convulsively, “yes, I killed him, I killed him, I shot him down without a word, yes, I am a murderer—a murderer—but don’t leave me, children, don’t leave me, Agnes, I’m *blind*! I’ve been a wicked man—but I’m blind! I went to the Bad Lands——” Still the thunder blotted out phrases, parts of words, but he poured them forth desperately, “I went there to hide from God, never to hear His name. That’s where I should have stayed and died——”

“Don’t! don’t!” Jenny Tildy cried hysterically, “you make the storm worse and worse.”

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

"—There, I could drink and forget. . . . You wouldn't let me drink, you wouldn't let me forget, and I saw his face and his eyes—I see them now—I can hear him say, 'Don't kill me'—and right up there is God—right here—all around me."

"Oh, yes, oh, yes," cried Agnes, "and I had forgot!" And then she wasn't half so frightened when the lightning cut saber blades over her head. "He's going to take care of me, God is. Why, He's done it too long to give up the job now."

John Earle sank upon the ground. "I can't, can't forget that voice, 'Don't kill me——' and then I shot him. Why didn't you let me drink myself to death? There's nothing for me anyhow but a murderer's death. I'm a murderer, yes, I confess, God——"

"He's crazy!" Jenny Tildy quavered, trying to break from his frantic grasp.

"Don't leave me—I'm blind! And the storm is on my head, beating me down—the storm . . . oh, God, You are the storm!"

"Father," panted Agnes, "that's why I can stand it, because God is the storm. You hold on to my hand and just let it rain."

Jenny Tildy was a great coward when thunder boomed overhead. "Give me a share, too!" She also clung to Agnes.

Their sudden dependence upon her courage increased it marvelously. She stood with head erect watching the zigzag lines of fire through sheets of

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

rain, looking very small indeed in that wide pasture-land, but feeling like a giant.

John Earle continued to utter disjointed phrases torn by the storm from the depths of his aroused conscience. “I felt his heart—his blood was on my hand—he was dead. And his father looked from the door and saw—Oh, God, there’s no place in Your heaven for a murderer; You have said it.”

Jenny Tildy urged loudly, “Don’t talk about it, *don’t!* Every time the sky goes black I see a dead man.”

Agnes said solemnly, “Perfect love hasn’t any fear in it; the Bible says so.”

“But I’m awful imperfect,” gasped Jenny Tildy.

XXVIII

WHERE CLEM'S DAUGHTER LIVED

THAT day was such as stands out in bold relief against the shadowy days of one's past, but mingled with the memory of its storm and terror dwelt always in Agnes' mind the exhilaration of the swiftly formed resolve to run to the farmhouse for shelter—the stumbling, half-blinded flight, followed by the ministration of kind hands, with shelter till the new day.

Shrinking together in the rain-driven meadow, lightning playing incessantly about their heads, the agonized cries of the blind man mingling with the booming of thunder, it seemed impossible that they should soon be finding their way along country roads with meadowlarks sweetly shrilling in the morning sunlight. It reminded Agnes that it is only when the light shines that there are shadows, and she danced in the sun, making shadows which, falling upon some inhabitant of the insect world, perhaps made it think that the world was full of gloom. Nothing of the storm remained but a little mud! At the very time they were being buffeted by wind and half-strangled by sheets of rain, this sun-gilded day

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

was in the hand of Time, almost ready to be given them!

Jenny Tildy, too, was full of song, crude, but wholesome. Only John Earle, showing an unrelieved blackness of brow, made his own weather and brooded under its sullen clouds. The water-proof case had saved the violin from injury, but for several days he refused to touch it; and after he had resumed his part as money-maker for the little family, he wouldn't utter a word, or give a sign that he heard what was said to him. Possibly he did not hear, for after the broken confession torn from his breast in the agony of superstitious terror, he gave up his struggle to banish the past.

And now they knew him for what he was, a murderer—how could they address him so lightly? Did they not see the blood on his hands? Was the slaying of a defenseless man so small a thing in their eyes that they, always some distance ahead, could forget his lagging figure in careless chatter about the scenes being traversed?

Maybe they had imagined his outcries a mere freak of madness. Still, one in the Bad Lands lives in the midst of bloodshed. He reflected that in Agnes' world somebody had been killed every week or so, at certain times almost daily. What had she known but the atmosphere of murderers, thieves, adulterers, drunken profligates? For several days he perplexed himself in wondering if they had ac-

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

cepted his words as true, and, if so, whether or not it changed their thought of him. When he heard Agnes inquiring about Winsie it reminded him of the sort of life Winsie had led—yet his little girl had been Winsie's friend! Agnes had never known what innocence was except when she looked into her own heart. . . . "It's a miracle!" he muttered—the first words spoken since the night of the storm.

"Winsie was awful good to me," he heard Agnes telling her friend. "And, oh, she was such a pretty lady. Wonder if she ever went back to Old Shady?"

"No," said Jenny Tildy briefly, "she dropped out."

"She talked like she might want to drown herself some day," Agnes mused.

"Well, she didn't. She didn't do nothing. She just dropped out."

John Earle had a sudden vision of Agnes' mother, and at the thought of the miracle of Agnes' innocence, a piercing light seemed burning its way to his brain.

One morning he heard Jenny Tildy say, "Wish I knew which a-way and where to we're going. Of course I can see my little restaurant standing at the end of the journey, but I haven't located the end."

Agnes spoke out so clear and sweetly shrill that the other stopped short in surprise at her emotion. "Oh, Jenny Tildy, let's go to Bellby! I've heard

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

it's a perfectly lovely place, and such nice people live there, such beautiful people, and that's where I want to hire myself out to be a lady's-maid." And her eyes were aglow with dancing lights.

John Earle stumbled forward and grasped her by the arm.

"What do you know about Bellby?" he demanded thickly. "Who told you? I say, who told you? Answer me quick! How did you know there's such a place?" He was shaking from head to foot, and the sound of his voice after his long silence was as strange to them as his quivering excitement. Both cried out, and Agnes, who had her secret to preserve, reddened guiltily.

But though she feared her father, she was true to Clem. "I don't know where Bellby is," she said shrinkingly, "but I've heard awful nice things about it, the nicest, sweetest things in the world. And—" her voice broke suddenly in passionate longing, "I want to go there, oh, I want to go to Bellby!"

"Then that's where we'll go," Jenny Tildy declared, "and if it don't look good to us we can move on. It'll settle my ideas to look forward to a real town and we'll ask every man, woman and child we meet where it is and how to go, but what we find out."

"No!" cried John Earle fiercely, "I say no! Never!"

"And as your pa is so dead set against it," added

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

Jenny Tildy, “it only makes me think of it more high. It’s decided and I’m glad, for I always want something definite to go on, something fixed on the map. Bellby—that rings sweet to me.”

“It is sweet,” Agnes exclaimed, “the one that told me about it never said anything that wasn’t so. It *is* sweet,” she added defiantly, for her father still held her by the arm.

His manner had changed. He spoke to her in a voice so deep and solemn, as if moved not by anger but awe, that she was thrilled without knowing why: “Agnes, have you been told that I was ever in Bellby?”

Though he could not see her face, the surprise in her voice was unmistakable.

“I have been,” he said slowly. “I know where it is; I will tell you the way.”

In the tumult of his conflicting emotions there was the instinct to lead them astray that they might never reach the town, but this treacherous impulse passed, and there formed in his darkened mind the fierce resolve to do the thing he had sworn never to do—return to the town where his wife had lived and died, Bellby from which, as a drink-crazed murderer, he had fled, carrying with him, as the last outrage to those he had wronged, the infant Agnes.

Blind, burned beyond recognition, living under an assumed name, what danger could there be in

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

prowling about the scenes of his better life? Even if there were palpable dangers, still he would have led the way. To the miracle of Agnes' salvation had been added this miracle of her knowledge. By what means, if not through divine interference, had she caught the only possible thread leading back to her mother's life, and from what other reason did she cling to it so tenaciously?

As he had felt God in the tempest and was therefore impelled to cry aloud his guilt, so now in this longing to go to Bellby he seemed sensible of an omnipotent guiding Hand. It was a Hand that might strike him to the dust, but had it not miraculously upheld his child?

“What people live in Bellby?” he asked in a low, thin voice.

“I never heard of anybody there but just one little girl named Jasmine. Maybe she's there now. I guess she is. There isn't any place like Bellby, and that's where I want to go.”

“And that's where we're going,” Jenny Tildy declared again.

“Yes,” he agreed, his voice suddenly tremulous, “yes, that's where we're going, to Bellby—we'll go back. . . . I mean—you see, I was there once. I'm going to tell you the way.”

And about a month later, from a slight rise in the road they saw a mile away the small town, its courthouse, churches, and cottages set in ample

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

lawns along the tree-embroidered streets that straggled downward to the river.

John Earle's sightless face, grim and sternly set, was that of a man who after intense self-struggle has calmly resolved to meet his fate.

Little dreaming that she was gazing upon her birthplace, Agnes none the less felt the tears rushing to her wide eyes. It seemed to her no wonder that the afternoon sun should shine in all its glory upon the masses of vivid green and the silver stream beyond, throwing spangled lights from the loftier spires and turning metal points to sparkling jewels, for it was Bellby, Bellby where Clem's daughter lived.

XXIX

THE SOUTH BREEZE BLOWS

BUT they did not at once push on to possess the land.

"Nobody in Bellby ever heard of us," Jenny Tildy said, "and we got to make our first appearance there in style if we expect to make a splurge."

So they retreated to a country schoolhouse whose long line of windows looked upon nothing but weeds and a lonely road, and there passed the night. The next day they detoured to a city, riding the last part of the way on a load of baled hay, thanks to the kindness of a farmer who had a hundred questions to ask about John Earle's blindness, but was curious about nothing else. In the city Jenny Tildy bought cheap but neat clothing, and the day after they went by train to Bellby and stepped into the hack like ordinary travelers; and the direction—"A good hotel, but not the swellest," took them to meager quarters whose "popular price" was a dollar a day.

Everything was so strange, and each phase of life had been changed for the next before it could

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

grow familiar in a manner so bewildering, that Agnes could hardly realize that at last she was where she had longed with all her heart to be. The fear that Jenny Tildy might not find a place to suit and would insist on leaving before she could gain courage to seek out Jasmine, kept her cheeks flushed with fever, and her eyes unnaturally bright. Her father seemed steeped in a lethargy from which nothing could rouse him, but in reality he, also, was keenly sensitive to their surroundings, straining his ears for a familiar name, or a once-known voice.

Jenny Tildy did not keep them long in suspense. Those three dollars a day put spurs to her heels, and on the third morning she had rented a two-room shell of a cottage with the privilege of buying it cheap if suited. It stood across the track from the little depot, and the granitoid walk that conducted everybody to town except those who rode went right by the door. Shading the doorway, and growing so close to the sidewalk that it had puffed it up here and cracked it there, stood a great elm tree without which there might have been some danger under the sun-blistered roof of spontaneous combustion.

In the back room, set apart for family life, the girls slept, while John Earle occupied a cot, dragged for his benefit, every evening, into the front room behind the counter. In laying in the stock of goods, in making arrangements for housekeeping and com-

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

merce, there was much he could have done. But he didn't do it—just sat on the scrap of porch under the elm and brooded over the bewildering thought that Agnes had led him back to the scenes of his youth and marriage—and crime.

Agnes, relieved from the fear of leaving Bellby, grew less impatient to meet Jasmine. She could not think of any way to approach one supposed to be utterly unknown to her and, without references, ask for service; and the making and rejecting of many plans prolonged the sweet savor of anticipation.

Jenny Tildy was too practical to pay any attention to the preoccupation of her companions. Baking pies on the gasoline stove, exchanging money over the counter, closely studying the public taste and investing with scrupulous care every penny earned, took all her time and thought.

"Don't matter how much I like red-hots," she said, "if the people want peanuts, I gotta give 'em peanuts, or they'll pass me by."

At the end of ten days the "railroad restaurant" had justified itself, but, as always, success brought its worries and responsibilities.

"It's a lots freer life on the road," Jenny Tildy sighed, "but we gotta remember that winter's a-coming, and be respectable."

Soon they grew to know the humble folk who lived in the hot boxes—unshaded by trees—adjoining

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

their shop, as well as members of the train-crew who would dart in for pie and milk or tobacco; and one day somebody dropped the name of the family with whom Jasmine boarded. The name was "Tredners" and Agnes could remember just how Clem had spoken it.

"I reckon the Tredners are going to lose their steady income for awhile," said the man who was a Bellbyite.

And his companion answered, "I don't know; there's some talk as if Miss Jasmine wasn't going back to the conservatory this fall."

And the first speaker said, inscrutably, "Well, you can't ever tell what Miss Jasmine's going to do; she don't know herself."

Agnes now had an excuse to mention the name she had been afraid to utter since first urging Jenny Tildy to seek out Bellby; and when the customers were gone, she asked her father:

"When you was once in this town, did ever you know anybody named Miss Jasmine?—or anybody called the Tredners?"

He shook his head. "No, they've moved here since my day. In my day there was— Listen, Agnes," he roused himself. "There's a place here I'd know well enough if I had anybody to lead me along as I'd direct. It's a place I'd like to be in once more because—just because once I was there and—and was different—then."

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

Something in his voice caused her heart to thrill with inexpressible emotion. She was reminded of the days when Clem had first shown signs of softening. The frogs had not yet begun to trill along the margins of his frozen domain, but the south breeze was beginning to blow and she felt it in her face, stinging her eyes to happy tears.

"Father, Jenny Tildy doesn't need me any more this evening—oh, won't you let me lead you?"

"Agnes!" he burst forth, groping with his hands, "lead me—lead me from this hour . . ." Sobs cut short the cry of unconditional surrender.

XXX

WHERE AGNES WAS BORN

THEY left the little restaurant without delay.

"I'll lead you just as you tell me," Agnes took her father's hand with the delicious thrill of one on the eve of great adventure.

His voice also quivered as he responded breathlessly, "There's an old house in Bellby—at least there was, ten years ago . . . a tall, white frame building of two stories, about twenty yards back from the street in a beautiful lawn. There was a hedge on each side of rosebushes. And there are—there were forest trees and some wonderful hard maples, perfectly symmetrical. In the early morning the birds sang there as I never heard them anywhere else—I remember a redbird in particular that came back with his mate every spring; and one very mild winter they stayed all year—their nest was in a great honeysuckle bower—you'll see it and it'll be covered with blossoms, too."

That tall, white frame building was evidently not only well-remembered, but still dear, for as they went thither, turning corners, or going "straight ahead"

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

as he directed, he continued to murmur broken phrases; Agnes had never seen him so intensely interested, nor heard him speak of anything so fully.

“Of course it might have burnt down. Of course strangers are living there to-day, because the others—well, all of them are gone, unless the old man still lives. But he couldn’t have lived, no . . . no—I’ve never heard, but I know he couldn’t have lived. We won’t go in, just pass the gate, very slowly, Agnes, and I’ll slip my hand along the top of the fence—you may hold my cane, if you will——” How gentle, how humble!

When she told him they had come to the brick church with the square cupola, he whispered:

“It’s the very next place. You see the white paling fence and the smooth blue grass stretching like a green carpet to the front porch—and you see—Agnes, it’s a miracle!—you see the long white house with the bright green shutters. You see all this, don’t you, child?”

“The fence is half fallen down,” she told him, “and the part with the gate in it is flat on the ground. The whole big yard is just weeds, and so high! I don’t see any blue grass, but it might be down under. And I guess the house was white once, it don’t look anything, now.”

“Oh!” he exclaimed, as if he had been struck a blow. He stood still for a few moments, his hand trembling in hers. Then his manner became ani-

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

mated. “Agnes! Of course, then, the place is deserted. Oh, Agnes! there’s nobody to care if we—— Let’s go in there, I so want to go in once more, just once more . . . just once——” His bent figure quivered with eagerness.

Agnes was glad he was willing to go in, for despite the air of long neglect, she found something of kindness in the aspect of unkept yard and dismantled house, like a smile of welcome on the face of a beggar.

There was a narrow path through knee-high weeds winding from the fallen gate around a pine tree through a clump of rosebushes to the decaying steps of the front porch. John Earle paused to bear his weight against the pine tree, and again to pluck a few leaves from a rosebush, and from the expression of his face, Agnes knew he did not wish to hear her talking, though there was much she wanted to say.

Before they reached the porch, the door opened, and an old man came out, leaning upon a cane—— “Such a lovely old man,” Agnes whispered; “I wish you could see him.”

Her father stopped as if petrified, and she felt his hand grow cold.

“Come and rest on the steps,” called the old man, carefully seating himself in the only chair because his weakness would not suffer him to stand long. “I am glad to have you come, but that’s all I can offer you—rest—blessed rest.”

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

His big felt hat was shabby, his clothes were patched, his shoes broken. In any other scene he must have appeared as a picture out of its frame; but in that neglected, time-corroded setting, he was perfect.

He warmly urged his invitation and Agnes drew John Earle forward, saying eagerly, “Father saw this place once, a long time ago, so I said I’d lead him here—and just as soon as I saw who you were, I knew you wouldn’t mind.”

The old man looked at her attentively, smiling wistfully. “And who am I, my dear?” he asked as he pushed aside a heavy gilt-edged book to make room for her to sit at his feet.

“I don’t know your name,” Agnes explained, “but I know your book——” and she gave the Bible a friendly pat.

With his smile of rare tenderness, he bent closer to study her countenance. “You remind me of some one who has not sat on that step for many long years,” he murmured. “Since you love my book, we must love each other.”

John Earle gave a smothered groan and averted his face.

“Sir,” said the old man compassionately, “some dreadful accident has deprived you of the use of your eyes; but I trust you are reconciled.”

The other did not reply, but he shook his head in sudden passion, and his face, as always happened

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

when distorted by vehement emotion, became furrowed along the deep scars, making his whole aspect grimly repellent.

Agnes explained simply, “He doesn’t understand God.”

“Ah, what a pity! But it was so with me, once. I had two children . . . and my son soon after his marriage was shot down by my daughter’s husband. And that man who had sworn to cherish and protect my girl, fled with her brother’s blood on his hands, and carried off with him her only child. Daughter died soon afterwards, as surely killed by him as if he had shot her down at my door. Within a year, my son’s wife died, too. That man, my daughter’s husband, was a triple murderer as well as kidnaper—wouldn’t you say so? And utterly without conscience—for he’s never let any one know what became of the child. He doesn’t care what hearts are broken. Well, well, I’m the only one left of a large family, so mine is the only heart to suffer now.”

John Earle, with his face buried in his hands, sat motionless.

“Sir, do you not think my misfortunes terrible? If I only knew that the little one had not come to harm! Forgive me for pressing the point, but am I not unfortunate?”

At first John Earle seemed not to hear, but as his answer was evidently awaited, he nodded, without removing his hands.

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

The old man continued with thrilling earnestness. “For years I spent large sums trying to track down the murderer—Edgar Garnett, my son-in-law; and the awful fury of vengeful longings made my life a horrible fever. That grew less with time, but fears concerning my granddaughter’s fate kept haunting me, haunting me day and night, day and night. I spent everything in the search—all is gone, this property is soon to be sold for the mortgage—it was no use.”

Agnes asked pityingly, “And you never did hear what became of her?”

“Never. When I have to walk out of this house for the last time, I don’t know what’s to become of me—and yet, I am reconciled. In spite of all that has happened to my darlings and that may happen to me—yonder is God; I am here waiting until He is ready.”

There was a solemn pause, then he added more cheerfully, “Do you wonder, sir, why I trouble you, a stranger, with the story of my misfortunes? Only to show you that it is always possible to find peace. I beg you not to rebel because you are blind. I used to beat my breast against the closed doors of what couldn’t be changed. Don’t do that—think of your daughter. You owe her every chance in life you’ve ever had, and you must have had many chances of happiness—who hasn’t? Let me read aloud. . . .”

Without waiting for the crouching figure to nod

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

permission, he reached for the heavy book which Agnes eagerly lifted to his knees. In the clear twilight he read verse after verse, and when he paused, Agnes, finding the place, would say urgently, “Read him this . . . read him this——” And the old man who knew the “places” so well that he did not have to see very distinctly, read till the light was only a gray mist in the sky.

“May we come again?” Agnes asked when her father, always without a word, rose to be led home.

From the wistful manner of his begging them to do so, it was evident that he had taken a great liking to the young girl. As they passed the brick church with its square cupola, she burst out in shrilly sweet enthusiasm——

“Father, oh, father, wasn’t it beautiful!”

He answered unsteadily, “Yes, dear, it was a blessed hour.”

XXXI

AGNES' INTRODUCTION TO CLEM'S DAUGHTER

AGNES regarded the church as the Bible in action; and, because she held the book in uncritical devotion, she loved the very brick and mortar of the meeting house, joining in the worship with ecstatic enthusiasm. Her spirit-lamp burned a white flame in the breath of prayer and song. Sermons, now heard for the first time in her life, were human speech tiptoeing toward Heaven. When the minister raised his voice, he lifted her inmost emotions with it, sending them floating in an ether not of earth.

The people listened so solemnly that she imagined they were all cautiously treading that only difficult way worth the trouble; it made her feel very close of kin to these well-dressed men and women, who, were the truth known, would have been slow to acknowledge their little spiritual relative. Sermons twice a week, Sunday-school and the young people's society, to say nothing of midweek prayer meeting—Jenny Tildy let her go to all of them—what happiness!

On the second Sunday morning, the minister an-

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

nounced, “Miss Jasmine Everett will favor us with a solo.”

This was Agnes’ introduction to Clem’s daughter.

Some one in the choir stood up, moved to the front of the platform, looked about the building, and noted the tremulous stars in Agnes’ eyes. As she sang, she glanced several times toward the little stranger and perhaps sang better than usual when she saw the stars extinguished in tears. What a marvelous voice, what a marvelous message of divine love! And what a marvel that it should be permitted Agnes thus to gaze into the face of Clem’s daughter—Clem, who had died for her. With eyes fastened upon the lovely features, Agnes murmured in her heart, “Yes—and I would die for *you*, Jasmine.”

XXXII

JASMINE'S LOVERS

JASMINE had a look that was somehow like Clem's, but Agnes could not have explained what it was, for there was nothing big about the daughter; the figure, though exquisitely proportioned, was even less than medium size, the head was slight and the features corresponding small. But this curved and magically rounded slightness, vibrant with immense energy, attained somehow a piquancy, an absorbing charm, that caused heart-tightenings by mere changes of position. The voice was full of melting sweetness that went straight to the heart's core, making one feel delightful pity for the world and sweet compassion for the singer and above all for one's self. Her vibrant tones in weaving their spell, drew over everything a veil of exquisite sadness, cool and soft like a shadow that envelopes the earth when a little cloud for a few moments obscures the sunlight unprized before.

For a long time afterwards, Agnes never saw Jasmine without the deep red halo cast from the stained window over her golden hair, or heard her

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

voice without the suggestion of organ tones. And because she had sung so touchingly of divine love, Agnes imagined she was going to live very close to God when she became Jasmine's maid, not understanding that to the lovely singer, He was only a song.

It was not so difficult to secure the coveted position as she had feared. Willing workers at any price were scarce in Bellby, and the Tredners with whom Jasmine lived had been looking all summer for a young girl to "sleep out" and relieve the old family servant from waiting on their boarder. They were loyal members of the church and were soon attracted to Agnes because she was always "there," while her boundless admiration for Jasmine proved irresistible.

Jasmine almost lived upon admiration and even that of a small lady's-maid was grateful to her incense-loving soul. So fond of praise was the lovely singer that she kept about her a circle of young people—for the most part, young men—several of whom firmly believed himself the favored lover. In reality, however, there was only one who stood the ghost of a chance.

Agnes was glad it was Theodore Veston whom Jasmine favored above all others; he was so handsome, so tall and erect, his bearing so proud and distinguished, his thoughts of the future so ambitious—and besides, he was kind to Agnes. Nobody

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

could have been good enough for Jasmine, if it hadn't been for Mr. Veston; but he was good enough for her; he was good enough for anybody. Every bit of Agnes—she couldn't have told why, it was as much a surprise to her as it could have been to others—every thought of her mind and every emotion of her heart seemed doubled when he was present.

Her servile position so blinded the eyes of others to her attractiveness, it was as if wherever she stood there was a blank spot in nature; but Theodore's keen gray eyes penetrated the umbra of a dollar-and-a-half-a-week and discovered the shining of a gentle face whose sweet gravity touched him like soft fingers in the hair. And then, Agnes' adoration of Jasmine was so open that the Tredners and others laughed about it, and whoever loved Jasmine—except of course one of those egotistical young men—had Theodore's right hand to lean upon.

XXXIII

THE FIRST KISS

A SERVANT thrust into the midst of a family may so absorb its atmosphere as to exhale its air, echo its tones, think its thoughts—become one of them. In subordinating her personality to that of her mistress—the only course to Jasmine's favor—Agnes identified herself with the other's hopes and interests. The Tredners did not count—except as the roof in keeping off rain, or the family horse in harness. They were a plain, quiet pair between sixty and sixty-five, content in their ownership of the house to sit aside and let Jasmine shine.

They were seldom referred to as "Mr. and Mrs. Tredner"—it was generally "the Tredners," as if, taken together, they formed but one unit in Bellby life. So unobtrusive were they, and each so like the other, people usually quite looked over their heads when wanting to see anything. Although Jasmine had lived with them from a child and imagined she would remain their boarder even should her mysterious mother cut off her allowance, the Tredners made no show of affection. So long had

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

they squeezed themselves against the walls of life to let other people get by, that they had grown chilled, staying so long in the cold; but that was all the better for harmony since Jasmine required every one to warm at her fire.

Jasmine had a way of flashing her blue eyes upon one that made one feel himself first in her regard. When she issued orders they were carried out—perhaps the Tredners enjoyed obeying, perhaps they didn't, you couldn't tell; but Agnes felt that they should, since that was what they were for, and her mistress, reading her faithful heart, treated her less and less as a servant; or rather, admitted her to the circle of her admirers, all of whom, in a sense, were her slaves.

On this footing of growing intimacy Agnes presently became aware of a fierce battle in progress between Jasmine's ambition for fame and her love for Theodore Veston. Another year at the conservatory would complete her musical education, but an opportunity had met her more than half-way to become leading soprano of a lyceum singing club to begin touring the states in early October.

If she joined the troupe it would end everything between her and her lover, for which Agnes would be sorry, but not so sorry as she felt she should be. And why that was, she didn't know, for she admired Theodore with all her heart, yes, loved him because he loved her mistress. He belonged to a splendid

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

family, so grand that they never saw Agnes in her cap and apron, and he was as ambitious in his way as Jasmine in hers.

From boyhood he had seen himself in Congress, where his father was to-day, and having just been elected prosecuting attorney of Bellby county, he thought himself fairly on his way to the goal. Nothing should stand between himself and highest honors if he could help marrying a girl who was "on the road," much as he might love her. His love was great enough to lead them into many lovers' quarrels whose bitter war-notes and dove-like cooings of reconciliation reached Agnes' ears.

If Jasmine didn't care enough for him to give up the stage. . . . If his love was so selfish that it must hide her talent from the world. . . . The arguments were always the same. Sometimes Agnes found Jasmine weeping in solitude, sometimes saw Theodore leaving the house with his proud, handsome face set in cold lines of iron resolve.

After one of these long-protracted debates that came to nothing but heartache, Jasmine gave a lawn party and was so gracious to everybody except Theodore, that he was soon hovering on the outskirts of gaiety seeking an excuse to get away.

Beyond the rosebushes he came upon Agnes, for the present at liberty, standing where, unobserved, she could watch Jasmine's glowing cheeks and quick, pretty gestures.

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

Theodore stooped to see what she was looking at through the brier-rosebushes, and when he saw, turned to stare at her wonderingly. Although he had often nodded to her and even smiled, he had never till this moment noticed what she looked like, or how she was dressed. What a singular lady's-maid!—he had never seen such a child elsewhere.

Her face was speaking, and he knew he could answer it in perfect safety.

“We both love her,” he whispered.

“Oh, yes!” Agnes breathed happily.

Then he kissed her just because—but, in fact, there was no real reason, it was the last thing he had intended, only it had seemed that she ought to be kissed for her love for Jasmine—that was it, he was kissing her for Jasmine. And it couldn't make any difference whether he kissed her or not, because she was such a child; and with that look on her face, such an adorably lovely child. Possibly if she had not been like a lovely flower whose perfume was incense for Jasmine, he wouldn't have thought of it for a moment.

And anyway, he soon forgot.

But Agnes didn't. Whenever she remembered, it made her feel that life was a rush of hot wind on her cheeks—something hard to put into words, but very pleasant and new and undreamed of. Two or three times after that he would have kissed her just

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

for no reason at all, if she had not glided unobtrusively from his approach.

That was one of the strangest things about this new feeling, that, though its memory was poignantly sweet, she would not have had a repetition of the experience for worlds. When they chanced to be alone and she saw the danger-light in his eyes, which she took as a signal that her small train of cars had better slide down a sidetrack, she appropriated a wise saying of the Bad Lands, telling herself—"I wasn't born yesterday."

When, in late September, Jasmine said goodby, she was a good deal surprised at Agnes' gushing tears, but too highly wrought up over her parting with Theodore to give her maid much consideration.

There had been a stormy farewell, filled with cruel reproaches and hot retorts, each imperiously standing for his own "rights." They did not even shake hands at parting, though each loved the other better than anything else in the world—except himself. No wonder Jasmine brushed past Agnes with hardly a glance.

"If my wife isn't willing to help me in my career, at least she shan't pull me down. . . ."

"When I marry, I'm going to marry a man and not a career! . . ." Final shots aimlessly fired to strike where they might. It was raining that day as the hack rattled away toward the station, and Jasmine's proudly held head, the white face, the

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

large blue eyes, the gleam of golden hair, made the only dash of color in the gray world.

Theodore Veston did not see Agnes as she trudged along the dripping sidewalks in the wake of the town hack, leaving the Tredners, who had no further need of her and who therefore saw her with relief beyond the gate. As she came to Jenny Tildy's restaurant, the train was just pulling out, and the gleam of Jasmine's hair showed at one of the windows. Agnes stood on tiptoe, handkerchief in hand, but Jasmine did not look out, so instead of waving it, she used it for her eyes.

XXXIV

"ROSES ARE RED . . ."

AGNES began paying regular visits to Mr. King, the old man who tarried in the mortgaged house. He was always delighted when he saw her coming round the church corner and when he read aloud from the book both loved, she would sit on the front steps at his feet looking up with shining eyes. Although Jasmine was gone and Theodore Veston was seen no more, she still had some one to love.

When Jenny Tildy and Agnes went to live in the mortgaged house where each could have a room to herself with windows looking away toward the river, and wide spaces to turn about in, John Earle resolutely held to the cottage opposite the depot. Of course it was Agnes who introduced Jenny Tildy to the white-haired old saint, and, as always, Jenny Tildy's interest took practical form. Why shouldn't they keep house for Mr. King, and hold that mortgage at bay, since by so doing they were practically coming into possession of a large comfortable house which would in no way interfere with restaurant activities?

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

There was no reason; and the poorhouse now called in vain for Mr. King. Soon after Jenny Tildy took him under her wing, the weeds were cut, the fence was patched, the winter coal laid in. And if John Earle persisted in using for a bedroom the back room of the restaurant, where the girls had been crowded on first coming to Bellby, what matter?

“Let ’im stay there,” said Jenny Tildy, “if he’s bent on not coming here where he could be comfortable. He makes a good watch dog for the restaurant, and thank goodness! he’s quit growling at his own family.”

“How things come about!” Agnes murmured gratefully, one morning, as she and her friend left the mortgaged house to go to work “for themselves,” and Mr. King, from the mended gate, watched benignly.

“Things always do,” Jenny Tildy responded, without emotion, “that’s what makes life.” And then she laughed and came as near blushing as she possibly could, for her thin, sallow cheeks turned to the grated red of worn leather, and Agnes knew that she had received a letter from Alley Jim, as well as if she had seen his “R R & V B.” Jim was reminding her that roses are red and violets are blue—it was poetry; and the last line contained a delicate comparison between Jenny Tildy and sugar.

The correspondence between these two was not

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

entirely devoted to flowers and sweetness. From the beginning it had been understood that Agnes and Miss Jocelyn should, if possible, be brought together; not, of course, that the young girl had the slightest claim upon the fine lady of Fifth Avenue, but because the fine lady had shown such surprising interest in the waif of the Bad Lands. She might—who could tell the vagaries of a fine lady without family ties?—take the whim of raising Agnes from want to a place where there are shells on center-tables, and murmuring vines at the windows.

Agnes felt more than ever “how things come about,” when, one day, a letter from Alley Jim informed them that his employer, Mr. Philip Brown, had at last been to see Miss Jocelyn, whose home was now in Italy. Strange to say, Miss Jocelyn had never forgotten Agnes, and as she was about to visit New York City it was her purpose to come to Bellby. And if she found Agnes according to her recollection——

“She’ll carry you off, all right!” Jenny Tildy declared, “for you’re lots fuller than you were then. And she’ll never leave go—she’ll hold on to you as long as you live. I see myself telling you goodbye right now, and may be I’d better do it, to save feelings.”

What excitement! The thought of meeting Miss Jocelyn again, and so soon—possibly of sailing away on that ocean which had filled as much space

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

as dry land in her dreams—maybe of living in a land of sunshine and blue skies . . . she was so dazzled by these prospects that, when she told Mr. King, she was blinded to the wistful dimming of his eyes.

And right then Mr. Theodore Veston came walking up the front path—the very first time she had seen him, except from a distance, since Jasmine went away. Of course he had known vaguely that she was still on the earth, but it hadn't seemed to matter in the least. Now, catching a glimpse of her sitting on the porch steps, her eloquent face miraculously glowing as she poured forth her wonderful news, it suddenly mattered.

He asked her where she had been and what she had been doing, his tones gently reproachful, as if his forgetfulness of her were all her fault, and Agnes was thrilled by his charm of manner, his dark handsome face, his resonant voice, his gray eyes, large and luminous. When he heard about Miss Jocelyn he was glad for her and pretended to be sorry for himself since he “might never see her again”—as if he couldn't have seen her every day in the week!

And he did chance to see her the next day as he drove by, whereupon he called for her to “get in”; they talked a great deal about Jasmine; and when they left the buggy to visit a certain rock that towered beyond a little backwater pool from the river, he carried her in his arms across the log that

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

looked so slippery. And he carried her back, wondering why he should give himself so much trouble to entertain a thirteen-year-old child.

After they had rested on a mossy ledge, he wanted to take her for another visit to the jutting rock, of course across the rustic bridge, but she thought she had been there often enough. All the same, it had been as dear to her to rest confidently in his care as it was to him to hold her out of danger. And when he bent down she did not turn away her cheek, because Jasmine had told him goodbye forever. And when he bade her goodbye at the dear old rickety gate, she thought with all her might, as he held her hand, "R R & V B."

So much did he enjoy that ride—particularly the incident of the slippery log—that he insisted they must try it again the next day.

However, the slippery log was ten years older before it saw Agnes again, for on the very next day came Miss Jocelyn.

XXXV

THE FAREWELL LETTER

IN the meantime, the change wrought in John Earle had made of him a new man. But because no beams of that inward light found escape through his blind eyes, neither Jenny Tildy nor Agnes suspected how great was the transformation. Least of all did he understand; yet he realized that all the power of his being was bent upon one thought which at last had become an overmastering resolve; to atone for the past. How? He spent his waking hours in trying to solve the problem.

It did not occur to him as strange that thoughts formerly banished by whatever possible means should now be eagerly sought; or that he should be content to listen while his daughter read aloud from the book she had found in the heart of the Bad Lands; or that his brow should remain serene when God was mentioned.

Having passed from hatred and terror and drunkenness to a marvelous peace by steps unforeseen and indescribable, the shadows of former states of mind melted and became lost in each successive advance

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

toward freedom. The time came when it was necessary to explain something of all this to Jenny Tildy; and one late afternoon, having been assured that Agnes was with Mr. King and that Jenny Tildy had time to spare, he asked to be led to the river where he could talk to her in his boat, insured against interruption.

The boat was really his. Such keen relish had he shown in feeling it rock to and fro while securely chained to the ring in the worm-eaten wharf, that it had been bought for him some months ago. It had not taken him long to find his way along down the steep pebbly road to the rattling planks from which decaying steps descended to his waiting skiff. Seated there, the quiver of the craft responding to the throbbing of the tide, he gained an exhilarating sense of motion, as if he were voyaging toward a land unseen by mortal eyes.

The town boys, who had made the neglected wharf their playground, respected his solitude and, finding him thus, would stroll away with curious backward glances at his sightless face turned toward the receding current, at his arms folded across his breast.

“Can anybody hear us talking, Jenny Tildy? Anybody in sight? Good! Is the sun about to set? Already? Then it’ll be getting dark very soon. I am glad of that, too. Listen—I want to write a letter to Agnes, to leave for her to read after I am gone.”

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

“Gone!” Jenny Tildy looked at him shrewdly—he seemed perfectly well.

He spoke casually. “Oh, yes, blind people can travel all over the world. Any one’ll lead them over the crossings. Yes, I’m going away—never mind when or how. I want you to be able to tell Agnes you didn’t know—see? She might feel you hadn’t treated her right. I think she’ll miss me, a little, be sorry just at first; but Miss Jocelyn’ll take care of her, educate her, teach her to be all that her mother was . . . Wonderful thing that Miss Jocelyn should have come into Agnes’ life! Why, Jenny Tildy, I *know* there’s One above—and that’s why I’m leaving; because He’s up there watching; always has been.”

Jenny Tildy stared at him, not knowing what to think.

“I tried to hide, but He saw me. He brought me back to the place where I—to this place, you know. Why wouldn’t He let me die in the filth and shame of the Bad Lands? What did He bring me back to Bellby for? Did I ask to be dragged out of the gutter? Did I want to be saved? I cursed Him, but He wouldn’t let me die.”

She listened with increasing uneasiness to his passionate voice, and his quivering face made her glance hastily toward the stairway leading up from the water. If his mind were really unbalanced——

“But you know I can’t write, so I’m going to ask

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

you to be my letter to Agnes, and you're to tell her just as much or little, and at just such a time as seems best to you. Listen closely to every word, for I'll make it short; it's a story I won't want to repeat until I stand at the judgment bar.”

Every word was costing him a visible effort:

“When I lived in Bellby, the husband of Agnes' mother, I got to drinking so constantly that toward the last I never passed a day free from the craze that always came with the first glass. I was a musician—but never mind that. Sometimes my wife ran to her brother's house for protection, for she was afraid of me, at night, you see. And he ventured to remonstrate—it was his duty, yes, I see that. But he came once at the wrong time—and his father was standing at the door—saw me shoot—his father was Mr. King.”

There was silence till Jenny Tildy said, “I'd guessed that.”

“I was sobered when I saw the blood—just sobered enough to be a devil with cunning . . . I got away from them all, and carried Agnes with me.”

“I'd guessed,” said Jenny Tildy in a low voice, “why you wouldn't come to live at Mr. King's. You know, you told us in the storm about—it; but Agnes thinks maybe it was a mistake, somehow.”

“If it were a mistake—God! No—I'm going away. Do you think it would make Mr. King happier to know that Agnes is his granddaughter?”

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

Wouldn't he be horrified at the knowledge that her father killed his son? Best leave them in ignorance, don't you think? You must decide that, after I'm gone.”

“But where can you go and what can you do? There's nobody to take up what you did so many years ago—and see how everything moves along! If Miss Jocelyn takes Aggie away, you can stay on with me here and forget it. When you've got a real trouble you can't go off and leave it—it'll go with you. Anyway, people crazy-drunk are as crazy as sober folks, and you didn't know what you were doing. The plainer you tell me how wicked you were, the better I like you; and you know I thought but very little of you at the start.”

From the measured tone of his response, it was evident that he expressed the matured thoughts of many weeks.

“I am a murderer, child; let me face the truth without the disguise of one softening word, my breast bared naked to God; these hands have taken the life of one who would have been my friend. And I robbed a mother of her child, leaving her to die heart-broken. If I could bring them from the grave, I'd cast myself at their feet—there's no use in that,” he broke off.

“But, Mr. Earle——”

“If Agnes' grandfather were revengeful, I'd go to him and say, ‘I confess everything, I give myself

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

up; have me condemned, executed, even that is too good for me.’ But you know Mr. King—it would make him terribly unhappy if Agnes’ father were hanged. He used to want my life, but now—you should hear him tell how he has found peace! I can’t publicly acknowledge my guilt while he lives—it would be another stab at his heart. And besides I am not in debt to Mr. King. Listen, child, I’m in debt to God. Yes, and I mean to pay Him.”

Jenny Tildy, still searching his face, was confirmed in her impression of a morbid, unhinged mind, but at the same time she found a look of such deep and serene peace that her breath caught in her throat.

“I took a life. What can I do but give one in exchange? He was a handsome fellow, but recently married, full of high hopes—and you see what I am, a blind and battered wreck. Still, I offer all I have, myself as I am. Jenny Tildy——”

His face was suddenly irradiated. “I have been thinking. . . . Suppose I win a respected station in the world, become *a man*, honored, even—yes, it’s possible, I’ve thought of a way. Then, after I’ve made good, after the world has recognized my worth, then—oh, *then*, it would mean something to leave it all—everything—and give myself up to justice.”

He grasped her arm eagerly. “If I could do that, don’t you believe it would somehow be counted to my favor? I’m not a fit sacrifice, but I might make

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

myself fit. Now you know my ambition. I offer myself now—this night—unworthy as I am. But if God is willing to wait, oh, I would like to come to Him as a real man.”

“But how?” Jenny Tildy was frightened by his solemn manner. “What can you mean by offering yourself to-night? You mustn’t forget that Agnes——”

“That’s the last thing I need think about. When Miss Jocelyn comes to-morrow, she’ll fall in love with her again—how could she help it?—and my going away will prove her blessing. Now I’m going to tell you to leave me, dear girl, without asking me anything else. Remember——”

His face was lighted by a whimsical smile such as she had never seen there, “You are just my letter to Agnes, to be opened and read when you think best. Now, a letter can’t ask any question, or say anything, that hasn’t been written in it. But I *do* say, ‘Goodby and God bless you, and may you be supremely happy.’”

Deeply troubled, she was loath to echo “goodby.” “It’s getting mighty dark; hadn’t you better let me lead you home?”

“Oh, I know the way—I know it perfectly,” he said cheerfully. “And the dark’s nothing to me; why, it’s my home,—I live in it!”

He waited till her footsteps had died away, then unlocked the padlock and swung off the rusty chain.

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

In a moment the current had caught him and swept him out upon the broad river. Above the darkened tide a few faint stars were trembling into life for those who had eyes to see.

With upturned face the man in the drifting boat shot past the twinkling lights of Bellby and the cool breath from dense woods on either hand mingled with the river-air. As unreservedly as the frail boat was given to the chance currents of the rushing river, he had given himself up; whatever the sequel, there was in his soul no hesitation, no fear, no thought or purpose that he would have hidden from the Eyes watching beyond the stars.

XXXVI

THE HOME OF VANISHED FACES

ONE evening at the close of spring Agnes found herself eagerly following the path from the front gate that wound through rosebushes to the building which, ten years ago, had been "the mortgaged house."

"Does it look natural?" Miss Jocelyn asked, watching her with uncritical love mingled with keen curiosity.

Agnes was too deeply moved to reply, for all looked just as it did on the evening she led her father for the first and only time past the brick church; and because the descending sun cast the same shadows over the weed-infested yard and glowed like fire in the curtainless windows, she felt that the past not only of things, but of people, should be reproduced. The same setting—why was there no magic in its appeal to bring back the same actors?—Old Mr. King whom she never knew as her grandfather until Jenny Tildy's letter reached her in Italy after his death; and her father who had grown so gentle and strangely humble before the night of his disappearance; and Jenny Tildy—strange to think of

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

her in the far-off city as the wife of Alley Jim when here was the very gate her capable hands had mended!

And beside that very fence had driven, by merest chance, Theodore Veston, his keen and splendid eyes looking for the little girl no one was ever to see again. For strangest of all, to the tall and slender young woman who called herself “Agnes,” there no longer existed that little girl who had danced accompaniment to the shadow of the pine and had felt that life was a hot wind on her face at memory of a certain scene in the rosebushes.

Presently she answered in an uncertain voice, “It was my mother’s home . . . And the only home I ever knew except the one you have given me. I can’t express how dear it seems—everything, even the weeds and stones! I love it—the chimney, the steps of the porch, the way the shadows fall. . . . I love it for what can’t be seen, for what has passed away; because all that has passed away seems lingering about the old place.”

“I know just what you mean,” said Miss Jocelyn softly; “it’s to take a pressed flower from between the leaves of an old book, and feel a warm hand.”

There was a quiver in her sensitive voice, but because she dreaded any show of emotion, she smiled, and put her pressed flower back in the book of her memory. She said in cheery tones, “I shall find it a very interesting experiment, watching developments.

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

You are pleased on first coming back; that's something for me to remember. How you'll feel next week, however, will be more important.”

Agnes mocked her tenderly as they seated themselves on the porch-steps. “An ‘interesting experiment’! You closed up the villa near Naples, you put it in charge of an agent—all your beautiful gardens and drives and the palace with the books you love and the pictures; and you brought me to America, though you dislike sea-travel; and have come to a village that can't amuse you, just because you kept probing and probing till you learned that I craved to spend one more year in Bellby! Whatever you think I want, you spoil me by getting for me. . . . But oh, Aunt Lucia! if you won't be too bored, just for a year—or half of a year—till winter, anyway, I'm selfish enough to let you spoil me. For to sleep in the old room where I found out what it means to be really happy . . . to breathe the air of the past—and then we'll go back to Naples for the rest of our lives.”

“Don't forget the indispensable condition: on no account are you to let anybody find out you were ever in this town before. Our coming here is simply the whim of a rich and discontented old maid wandering about in quest of new experiences.”

“No one will ever guess I was Jasmine's maid,” Agnes assured her as they went into the echoing hall, “unless I'm recognized.”

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

“No fear of that. Whoever looked closely enough at a lady’s-maid, the child of a blind, strolling musician, to recognize her in the ‘niece’ of a—what shall I say? The ‘niece’ of Miss Lucia Jocelyn, the millionaire of New York, who has expatriated herself on account of what the papers happily refer to as a ‘disappointment’!”

Agnes was looking about too eagerly to heed these slightly embittered words. The building was not entirely bare. After Mr. King’s death, Jenny Tildy had sent to Agnes’ Italian address such few belongings of the grandfather as might be valued as souvenirs. In the dusty rooms were a few chairs and tables with whose particular infirmities she was familiar.

Miss Jocelyn was silent until the examination was ended, but when they returned to the front steps she spoke as one who, during silence, has been holding to the thread of her thought.

“On the threshold of our adventures, it would be interesting to hear what you expect to get out of them.”

With a gesture, Agnes included the house and grounds. “Living here, once more—the same trees, the same walls, the same view of the river, oh——”

Miss Jocelyn slipped her arm about the other’s neck and added lightly, “And seeing the same faces without really being seen, like a fairy? You should have been named ‘Fairy,’ for you’re full of magic that sweetens bitterness.”

XXXVII

"LIVING IT DOWN"

DURING the first days in Bellby there were not many opportunities for intercourse with its inhabitants, since long disuse had necessitated many improvements in the house, and the rooms must be furnished for what Miss Jocelyn considered a year's camping-out on the outskirts of civilization.

However, even at the busiest times, before life had worn frictionless grooves for its wheels' daily rounds, the brick church with the square cupola served as an outpost for social reconnoissance. Agnes was obliged to revise the idealistic pictures of Bellby which her fancy had painted in Italy, for doubtless no city was ever so beautiful as the one past which the crystal river flowed in her dreams. But some scenes were still overcolored by the impressionistic touch of a child's memory; for instance, the mere sight of Mr. and Mrs. Tredner, sitting in a front pew, their eyes fastened upon the minister's face, gave her a warm sense of the permanency of faith.

The ten years that had passed since she left their

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

door—without their thinking it worth while to say goodbye—had sifted snow here and there upon their locks, making them almost white in patches, and their lean dry features had hardened into lines never to be rubbed out. She thought theirs the hardness of Christian soldiers, and, remembering how they held as an indispensable virtue one's being present at every church service, rejoiced in their fidelity. Thank heaven, they were there yet! The devil would never slip through that anteroom without finding them on hand, well grounded in the doctrine!

“I very much fear,” Miss Jocelyn whispered, after the first Sunday service, before leaving their pew, “that your Jasmine has turned out very badly.”

Agnes was pale to the lips. “Oh, Aunt Lucia! What can you have heard?”

“My dear, my dear! You mustn't betray feeling for some one you're not supposed to know. Come, let us join those poor old dry bones”—she referred to the Tredners—“and while we walk with them from church do nothing but listen, while I draw out the whole sad history. It is a rather delicate story, but ‘Brother Tredner’ is an elder and the chairman of the board, so will know how to handle the matter gently.”

Outside, Miss Jocelyn asked, “What progress is being made, Mr. Tredner, in raising contributions for the new church building?” Then, having prom-

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

ised a hundred dollars in her niece's name, "who loves churches," she found herself at once a personage.

The hundred dollars having been duly entered in Mr. Tredner's well-worn notebook, Miss Jocelyn went straight to the point:

"Brother Tredner"—she had a subtle way of saying "Brother" that indicated it was, upon her lips, merely a complimentary term, by no means committing her to the obligations of sisterhood—"before we thought of buying a house and settling in your town, we had heard a good deal of Bellby."

"Yes," said Mr. Tredner kindly, "yes, yes." For the sake of the new church, he clutched eagerly at any chance straps of general conversation, finding no seat of ease in such unwonted traveling. "Yes, our fine cattle has made a considerable of a name for Bellby County."

Mrs. Tredner, with a side glance at Miss Jocelyn, wondered why she had bought that old King house. Feeling the sharp-cut difference between them, and holding herself to be all that was necessary, she secretly charged the distinguished look of the tall, mysteriously gowned woman to "worldliness," thus justifying her vague sense of disapproval by classifying it in her spiritual department.

Despite Agnes' uneasiness over the hint about Jasmine, she was warmed anew by the faces, tones, movements of this old couple; to be with them was

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

to catch an aftertaste of girlhood when one had thought the glass drained dry.

“Yes,” Miss Jocelyn was properly serious; “your cattle *are* famous. But so is your celebrated singer, Jessamine Dubois—who, before she went on the stage, was Jasmine Everett. We have read all about her; how her mother through the agency of a city missionary had her put in your care till she became of age—the mother she never knew; and how you were a father and mother to her——”

Mr. Tredner grew a dull red while his wife gave Miss Jocelyn a warning look.

“The fact is,” Mr. Tredner began, his dry voice sounding as if there were husks in his throat, “the fact is—*ha! hum!*—she—Jasmine,—but I would rather not discuss the—er—the affair.”

Again, Mrs. Tredner’s warning glance.

“Forgive me,” said Miss Jocelyn, easily. “I had not heard of her death. In fact, for several years, we haven’t seen her name in the home-papers—I mean the American newspapers.”

“*She* isn’t dead,” Mr. Tredner exclaimed in a tone that indicated, “Whoever else is, trust her to go on living!”

“Oh! Then?——”

Mrs. Tredner could remain silent no longer. “I am sorry to say, Miss Jocelyn, that Jasmine abused our confidence. There were proofs a-plenty,”—Mrs. Tredner pursed up her small mouth. “At

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

any rate, a proof; the only one necessary, Miss Jocelyn; the kind there's no gainsaying. Some crimes can be committed, leaving you in doubt as to who did 'em. Others, not. It was a terrible blow to the church."

"Yes," Mr. Tredner assented sternly, "but we turned her out, and we are trying to live it down. I believe when we build the new church it will be a great help, getting away from the place where she did her soloing. People can't help remembering; and it's hard for the preacher to find a text that don't start brains to working. Looks like he's all-time getting himself into pitfalls. You heard him this morning on 'Who Shall Cast the First Stone?' He is very unthoughted. I fear," he added musingly, "that his time with us is short." He added more cheerfully, "But in the new building, I believe we can live it down."

"That is what we are all aiming to do," his wife agreed; "to live it down." Her eyes brightened in the excitement of sudden resolve: "Mr. Tredner, you go ahead and start the kitchen-fire; I'll walk part-the-way home with these ladies. I want them to know just how it is, and what can be stated publicly in church isn't always to be bandied about in the midst of a group of three or four on the street, one of them being a man."

XXXVIII

PHILIP OR THEODORE?

MRS. TREDNER little suspected how deeply her account of Jasmine's disgrace struck to Agnes' heart, for Miss Jocelyn protected her as with a veil by her properly shocked but unemotional interest. Agnes would gladly have hidden her grief from her friend, but one cannot weep in secret night after night, however safely alone, without leaving clues for love to find.

At first, it seemed that she could not bear it; later, that something should be done about it—Jasmine must be found.

But, alas! nobody knew where Jasmine was in hiding; for the loss of her voice, three years ago, at the time of the child's birth, had ended her career in public—and of her private career, what was left? So no one knew where she was, and most emphatically no one cared. The world held that Jasmine was definitely finished, like a story so prolix of details and sequences, that not the ghost of a hope is left for a sequel.

Miss Jocelyn fancied Agnes would sooner grow

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

accustomed to the truth if they talked about it between themselves. "There's this difference between the poor creature and one who is dead," she told Agnes: "no one feels bound to speak good of her. If she could only have died years ago——"

"With those sweet songs on her lips," Agnes faltered, "with her big blue eyes so laughing and *good*, Aunt Lucia, so *good*. And her heart—her heart so kind. You should have heard her laughter; I've never known any like it—as musical as her songs."

"She were much better dead. And it would make things so comfortable for your church. They turned her out in a hot glow of holy indignation, but, my dear, it is impossible to maintain so high a temperature without feeding the flames with unworthy resentments. I imagine the very church board must have lost its righteous anger in the chill currents of its own imperfections. I should think that when pleading with sinners to come into the fold, it must be disconcerting to the minister to recall the sinner they've driven into outer darkness."

Later on, when Miss Jocelyn perceived that Agnes was actually losing flesh, she grew uneasy.

"My darling, you allow people's unhappiness to affect you as Philip Brown always did. He never could get rid of a beggar simply by giving alms, and when some poor wretch was bedridden, he not only sent a nurse, but lost sleep himself."

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

“I know how good he is,” Agnes murmured, thinking of Clem. “I wish he could find Jasmine.”

“But the world doesn’t lose sleep over its religion,” the other persisted. “If the people let their consciences be annoyed by the miseries of the world, what’s the use of committees and boards and clubs? Oh, Agnes, no one but Philip could meet your ideal—he works at his Christianity instead of hiring it done.”

With an arm slipped about Agnes, she added, masking her earnestness behind a tender smile, “Let me send for him; a holiday from the slums would do him good, and the distance is so short he’d not bitterly begrudge spending that little on himself. I know you think him old because he once fancied me—and goes on thinking he cares, from mere habit. But he’s just a boy—you should see him!”

Philip was written for that very day and on the days that followed, Miss Jocelyn looked anxiously for the answer—or for Philip in person, for Agnes did not regain her cheerfulness. Agnes could not forget that somewhere in the heedless world lived Clem’s daughter with her fatherless child. Strange that nobody seemed to care!—Eyes that had dimmed at her songs were dry with scorn for the singer.

Other days passed—she told Agnes, “I haven’t heard yet from Philip.” But Agnes manifestly didn’t care.

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

In trying to account for Agnes' utter lack of personal interest in one whose life work should have proved irresistible, she found in Theodore the only explanation. Besides, whenever he was mentioned, as often happened, Agnes' face was eloquent of her regard. To be sure, Theodore Veston, as candidate for Governor, was a name of great value to the daily press because of his campaign for Reform; Agnes would naturally follow with enthusiasm any leader bearing that banner—but so far as Miss Jocelyn's experience extended, a young woman does not espouse any Cause with glowing cheeks and beaming eyes unless, back of the Cause, there is a Man. Theodore was evidently the Man; and Miss Jocelyn, who held Agnes' desires second only to her own, was resolved to learn just how unreservedly her protégée had given herself up to hero-worship.

His family still lived in the little river-town, but he had long since gone to the city to try the fortunes of law. Many forced marches and orderly retreats among the camp-followers of practical politics had brought him in sight of the promised land—first the gubernatorial foothills; then, far ahead, almost lost in the hazy distance, the senatorial crest.

Still calling Bellby “home,” his custom was to visit his parents once a month. As yet Agnes had not seen him with them at church. In fact, latterly, he had swelled his “month” to five weeks, even six,

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

on almost any excuse, and Miss Jocelyn was growing desperately impatient.

"Let them once meet face-to-face," she reflected, "and if I'm not greatly mistaken, Agnes, after her ten years in Europe, will find him a rather small gentleman."

XXXIX

THEODORE'S PICNIC

BELLBY'S old worm-eaten wharf was gay with the joyous cries, music and tumult of a steam-boat excursion—it was the day of the far-famed Bellby Political Picnic. In a pasture near the suburbs, known temporarily as “the grounds,” burning speeches were delivered both by the Reformers and by the other party, which, claiming to be of as high moral fiber as any extant, termed the so-called Reformers “Hypocrites.”

Miss Jocelyn so timed the arrival of her carriage on the outskirts of the listening throng as to escape the sharp shooting of the advance musketry and hear only the play of the field guns. Ostensibly absorbed in the performance of Theodore Veston, her real concern was to note what devastation, if any, were wrought in her companion's reserve. Agnes, whose open countenance was defenseless before this keen reconnoissance, soon betrayed emotion difficult to ascribe to interest in abstract Right.

No sooner, indeed, did she catch sight of the speaker than a myriad host of tender memories

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

threatened to overwhelm her. She was once more Jasmine's little maid, and Theodore was standing with her behind the rosebushes. Here was the same Theodore, only handsomer, more distinguished looking, grander in every way. She listened to every word, her lips parted, her eyes bright, her hands clasped—and suddenly life became a warm wind on her cheek blowing from out the past with all the perfume of a young girl's dreaming.

He was so courteous to his opponent, so graceful in assuring him a cordial welcome in his own hometown, yet so tactful in explaining that this welcome was to the man, not as a representative of Anti-Reform, but as a well-meaning, though erring, brother-lawyer. Then he launched forth in a glowing tribute to Right, and dealt merciless blows to Oppression, Favoritism and Injustice. He raised his voice, he said, not for his Party, but for his Country and his God; and as the never-faltering voice rolled on, he attained the dignity of a hero fighting against fearful odds for a holy cause.

Under the sway of his impassioned pleading, some began to beat out their enthusiasm on tingling palms, and these scattered blows, sounding like the splattering of raindrops, were the prelude to a thunderous demonstration. Agnes clapped, too, and looked at Miss Jocelyn to help. But the elder lady gave Theodore no encouragement, for, to her sadly sophisticated intelligence, every blow struck for Re-

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

form is a stroke of the oar toward one's goal of personal ambition. However, though not joining in the cheering, she said nothing to destroy the Influence. She had never known any man—except Philip Brown—to lend his talents to God without charging at least ten per cent., and if Agnes should not learn to appreciate Philip, possibly this handsome defender of Righteousness might prove the next best opportunity.

Determined to precipitate more certainty from the solution of her doubts, Miss Jocelyn declared in favor of the returning boat excursion. At the close of the hot summer day they would take the moonlight trip to the city whither Theodore must return, spend the night at a hotel, and come back to Bellby by train the next morning. Agnes was too greatly pleased, on hearing of the plan, to wonder at her "aunt's" changed attitude toward excursions of all sorts,—and, of course, Theodore was charmed.

They had met at the noon hour. Theodore's mother, excessively proud of her brilliant son, naturally wanted him to meet the "best people," and the fame of Miss Jocelyn's millions left no doubts of her social standing; hence she had invited her and her "niece" days ago to the picnic dinner.

Had Theodore Veston been thinking of Agnes since the day he saw her last, it is doubtful if he would have recognized her in "Miss Agnes Jocelyn," the "niece" to fortune. At any rate he had not the

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

least suspicion that he had ever seen her until that moment when her face, discovered in the audience, had inspired him to an eloquence startling even to himself—causing to marvel his coolly watchful intellect while his lips were still hot.

His lack of recognition did not surprise her—of course he hadn't thought of her since their parting. When Miss Jocelyn came to carry her off to Italy, she had jealously withheld her real name from the very few who knew anything of her presence in town, being resolved to separate Agnes from her past; only Jenny Tildy and old Mr. King had been told. Of course Theodore had never tried to find out what had become of her—possibly didn't know she was gone. And anyway, she had been nothing to him but a reminder of Jasmine.

But she seemed a good deal to him at this picnic dinner. In fact, he scarcely noticed anybody else. The informality of standing about the tablecloth which stones held to the lawn, of stepping from place to place for fried chicken, olives, various salads, bread, etc., of talking earnestly with both hands occupied with food, of moving out of the way of other guests and coming together again—all this did more to get their acquaintanceship launched and out in midstream than could half a dozen formal dinners.

Miss Jocelyn had sometimes complained that Agnes was too silent in company—“Because, I fear, I have always monopolized everybody's attention.”

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

But to-day Agnes had no trouble in finding topics. Reform!—that is what she wanted to talk about, and though Theodore no doubt felt that he had said enough about it from the platform and that the subject might rest until his next public appearance, he was reconciled to hear it all over again because of the wonderful light on her glowing face.

Her dark eyes thrilled him even as he had thrilled his audience. Who wouldn't be for Reform to gain such an ally? He discovered in her something not to be described, elusive, delicately pure, yet without weakness—something that made him think of a fierce white flame that would 'destroy at a dart any shell of insincerity, any husk of empty pretense. He felt her to be the visible embodiment of the ideals regarding which he had spoken so enthusiastically. And the thought came to him, later, as they stood side-by-side on the moon-silvered deck of the steamboat, and the densely packed crowd made them virtually alone—the thought came and took vague form that he needed some one just like her to keep alight, with her pure flame, the fires of his public service which at unguarded hours were sometimes threatened by accumulating ashes.

It was a beautiful fancy, and he held to it while her fresh eager voice sounded in his ears, he played with it tentatively as he looked into her frank eyes, and by his manner he subtly expressed it, all the way down the river.

XL

PHILIP'S COMING

THE manner of Agnes' meeting with Theodore was so different from anything else in her experience that even had she been unprepared to renew the vaguely sweet and delicately pure sentiments of her girlhood, they must have returned to life at the magic name of Reform so eloquently proclaimed from the platform, so feelingly discussed on the steamboat to the music of the band.

There was so much to remember connected with Theodore—all the picnic followed by the river excursion; then the parting at the city hotel with Miss Jocelyn looking on seemingly gracious; the sleepless night of street-noises with their distracting intervals of dead silence, and the return to Bellby, during which the train chanted the spirited refrain, "Theo-Theo-Theodore! Theo-Theo-Theodore!" — till Agnes wondered that her companion did not notice and make comment.

Miss Jocelyn did not know what the train was saying. At the Bellby station a telegram was placed in her hand and she learned that because of some-

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

body's death—she was vaguely aware that Philip had once written feelingly concerning the person—and because of the necessity of disposing of the children, it would be fully a week before he could pay his visit.

During that week there was a dinner given the Jocelyns by the Vestons, and a church reception, and a Saturday night moving-picture show—and at every one of these Theodore was present, very much absorbed in Agnes.

At the end of the week, Philip came——

“Actually in the flesh!” cried Miss Jocelyn, grasping both his hands. “I’ve talked about you so much to Agnes, and you’ve kept out of sight so persistently, that I believe she almost regards you as a myth.”

Agnes’ smile was shadowy; in fact, when thinking of him at all, it had been as of some vague shape out of the past—like the wall surrounding the yard of the house of thieves, or the pump of Old Shady, or Winsie, all peach-bloom and cream. It was somewhat disconcerting to find the man who knew about God suddenly taking a definite place in one’s flesh-and-blood world, all the more disconcerting because Agnes’ mind was so filled with a dust storm of Theodore-thoughts, that clear vision was just then out of the question.

Happily, Philip had the genius of adjusting himself to other people; by some delicate intuition he

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

could gauge a companion's speed and put on steam or shut down brakes without reference to the condition of the road or to his own feelings. Agnes was too greatly absorbed in watching her Theodore-dream come true to be diverted from its full flowering; but, as no one else under such untoward conditions could possibly have done, Philip created in her a special interest for himself.

The expression of his face put her gratefully at ease, and the pressure of his hand at their first meeting told her that she had found a friend. There was so much for them to talk about in which nobody else could join—for instance, how Jenny Tildy and Alley Jim were working in the Bad Lands happy in each other's companionship—and how, on learning of Philip's visit, they had sent many messages, most of which he had forgotten.

And Jasmine, of course, Jasmine of whom Agnes dared not speak to Theodore; Philip did not know what had become of her, but was as anxious as Agnes to find out. They talked about Clem, telling each other it was well that she had not lived to see her beloved daughter disappear in the sinister shades of a lifelong obscurity. But she must be found, she must be given new heart——

“I'll persuade her to bring the child to the Bad Lands,” he declared. “The presence of the little one will brighten the sordid courts—and Jasmine will find peace in blessing other lives.”

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

“Oh!” cried Agnes, clasping her hands, “if it could be!”

He knew very well that the tender solicitude in her eyes, the warm glow of affection, was not for him, save as an agent of Providence. He knew there was no personal triumph for him in her next words, seemingly irrelevant——

“When I escaped that dreadful night and the policeman took me to your place, it seemed to me I couldn’t bear it because you had gone away and I was not to see you. I had the feeling that I *must* see you,—but you were gone—I wonder if you remember?”

“The fact is,” said Philip regretfully, “I do not remember.”

Agnes laughed disappointedly. “But no wonder,” she cried; “I was just one of all the people of the Bad Lands, and you were the only Philip Brown!”

Miss Jocelyn had a good excuse for withdrawing to a remote nook in the window-seat, and she took advantage of it to the full. Despite the impression Theodore had produced, she could not watch these two animated faces without hoping great hopes. All the same, there was a tinge of melancholy to her reflections. She had believed that at Philip’s coming it would be necessary first of all to convince him that his affection for her was only fraternal. At least six years ago, when definitely setting aside Agnes for him, she had written to that effect, and

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

while he had seemed to yield, after a few months' resistance, she believed him all the time subject to his delusion.

Nothing could be plainer, however, than that he had accepted her pronouncements without reserve. “I never really loved you,” she had written, and looking over the past, he had concluded that it was so. “Your love for me was never what you supposed; it was a boyish admiration, the sudden romantic fancy for a woman five years your senior, nothing more, Philip, nothing more.” Had it been nothing more? Of that he was not sure; but prolonged self-examination taught him that whatever it had been in his boyhood, it had passed away. There was no work for Miss Jocelyn in the way of disillusioning him; certainly not in the sense of being willing to give up all for him; but it was equally true that she had never loved anybody else.

He did not seem to count that—she would have liked for him to count it, just a little. However—of course——

And she forgot even these futile clingings to the old order of things when Philip broke the news that he could not stay all night—must leave on the boat even before dark.

“But you can't go!” Miss Jocelyn exclaimed, panic-stricken. “We—I need you *here*. Of all times——”

But somebody had been injured in a factory; his

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

sight was destroyed, a limb was torn away, and there was a wife lying at the point of death—and, of course, children. . . .

"I can't tell you what it costs me to give up the prospect of my week's vacation," he said, rising very tall and slender, looking careworn and sad with the poignant regret of it—he had not risen, he had not broken the news to Miss Jocelyn, until the deep-throated whistle of the steamboat filled the air. "Duty calls and one must obey. Perhaps later in the summer. . . ."

XLI

LOVE DEFERRED

LONG after Philip had gone back to his slums, Agnes remembered the look on his face as he had spoken to the whistle of the steamboat. It was so full of the courage of the soldier who is called from his loved ones to the front of battle—she loved that look, she exulted in that unselfish courage, and perhaps in no other way could Philip so distinctly have cut for himself a place in her affectionate memory.

But it was a place too exalted to obtrude itself in the every-day landscape of Bellby Life; a place that had nothing in common with moonlight on the river and music from across the water and Theodore beside her in the boat.

During the weeks following there were held, for the benefit of the church-fund, socials, bazaars, town-dinners—to the despair of the regular hotels and restaurants—and even an old-fashioned candy pulling; when the expenses of these functions were met, God was given the change. These made so constant a claim upon Theodore's time—he was

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

always Agnes' escort—that more than once he missed an important appointment for speaking a word for Reform; however, that mattered little—unless for Reform itself—for everything was so overwhelmingly in his favor that friend and foe looked upon him as good as elected.

Everything went his way at the August primary and when the news reached Bellby, those who were bitterest against Reform, yet of Theodore's party, contributed to the torchlight procession. Even those misérables who were in the hopeless minority went to see the hat-burning, and kept time to the vociferously triumphant band. For the great victory was not alone for Theodore—or for Reform; it was for “Our town.”

Preparations were quickly made for a Celebration Picnic and in little or no time a program was framed of speeches—a program of cruel length; lemonade-stands sprung from the dragon's-teeth of worldly foresight, and a merry-go-round was conjured into being.

The Celebration Picnic was held at the Big Rock where, ten years ago, Theodore had carried a certain little girl across the bridge of a single mossy log; and now as he and “Miss Agnes Jocelyn” strolled toward the romantic spot scarcely aware of the noisy crowds on all sides, and by the crowds scarcely heeded—for Bellby had in fancy married them before their time—“He'll be the next Gov-

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

ernor . . . and her aunt is one of the richest women in New York"—Theodore suddenly stopped, looking at his companion intently.

"Sometimes I've wondered who you remind me of," he said in a voice so low that if there were love in her heart, it need not be frightened. "Now I have it. A long time ago there was a little girl in town—don't know what became of her; just drifted to Bellby with a vagrant father and no doubt he took her away with him—a fiddling tramp."

"You're not going to say I remind you of *that* girl!" exclaimed Agnes, so startled lest the secret escape her that her manner became entirely new; her smile seemed one of raillery, of winsome mockery. So far was she from conscious of any added charm, that she imagined herself looking desperately guilty.

"Agnes!" He was thrilled, not suspecting it was fear that lent her the glow and sparkle. "No! You don't remind me of anybody else in all the world. . . . But she had your name, '*Agnes*,' that's all; and I happened to think of her because it was in this place I learned to know her. But you're like nobody—that's why I love you."

"No!" Agnes gasped, paling. "But wait!"

"Wait?" he echoed, trying to look into her eyes. "How wait?"

"But you mustn't. . . . Not now. Not till——"

"Till I'm elected?"

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

Then they both laughed out, she tremulously, afraid, yet amused at the motive he had suggested, he proudly, thinking he read her heart.

“No, but listen!” she urged, the smile still in her eyes.

“Look at me, Agnes.”

“No, I—I mustn’t. Not now. Not till you know. I don’t want you to go on; it’ll be the same to me as if you hadn’t spoken, as if you—you *don’t*, until you see Aunt Lucia.”

“Of course I’ll see your aunt. But——”

“No!” she interposed quickly, raising her face to meet his eyes. Her look was so steadfast, her face so pale, her lips so tremulous, that he lost some of his gay confidence. “There’s something about my life that you must know,” she faltered; “a secret I have promised Aunt Lucia not to tell. You must ask her what it is. If she explains certain things, you may feel very differently—about me.”

“What mysteries!” he exclaimed, disconcerted.

She bowed sorrowfully. “Yes, there are mysteries in my life.”

He walked by her side for some time, trying to accept this very unwelcome fact. At last he said abruptly, “Very well. Very well; I shall speak to your aunt to-night.”

She felt the disappointment in his carefully guarded manner, which amounted to displeasure, and while it did not surprise, it saddened her. As

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

by common consent they did not cross the rustic bridge leading to the Big Rock, but drew out of the way to let others pass. As Theodore made the detour of the crowd, he almost stumbled over a rotting log that had been cast aside when the new bridge was made.

“The very log!” he murmured to himself, wistfully.

For the rest of the evening, Agnes kept close beside Miss Jocelyn.

The sun had set when these two, drooping from picnic-weariness, entered the cool yard of what had once been the “mortgaged house.”

“Ah,” sighed Miss Jocelyn, “why does one ever leave home?”

Then Agnes plunged abruptly into the subject of Theodore’s meditated visit, but before Miss Jocelyn could utter a word, both were startled by a tall, thin form issuing from behind the rose bushes.

“I’ve come to spend my week’s vacation,” cried Philip, advancing, his strong, lean face glowing with anticipated pleasure. “What delight to be with you again!—a whole week; everything’s put in ship-shape order—I’m not even to be written to, not by anybody! How are you both? . . . Seem very tired; any bad news?”

“No, no,” Miss Jocelyn sighed, clasping his hand. “Just a picnic. And we’re charmed to see you, you dear Man-Who-Always-Came-Too-Late!”

XLII

'AGNES' LOVERS

IT was not the same as if, before the day of the Celebration Picnic, Philip had passed only about eight hours in the same house with Agnes. He had been prepared to find her as she was, and so finding her, the memory not only lingered after their first parting, but grew, strengthened, blossomed many-branched and many-flowered.

Doubtless he at first justified his absorption in this fair vision by reasoning that to secure such a partner would incalculably multiply the influence of his work; but presently he sought no excuse, no explanation. Returning now after an unusually severe month of torrential city heat during which day-dreams of Agnes had softened the sordid realities of crime and suffering, he found that what had seemed almost a fantastic delusion was a reality. He loved Agnes; not, he told himself, from first sight, but from years of intimate knowledge to which the sight of her had set its seal.

In all this time, Miss Jocelyn had dropped no hint of what was coming to pass between Theodore

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

and Agnes; she knew Philip too well for that—a word would have frightened him away. The epithet bestowed upon him at their meeting in the yard caused him genuine uneasiness, despite its vagueness—“Man-Who-Always-Came-Too-Late.” Did she mean he had come too late to win Agnes? She must mean that; and Agnes’ manner was so preoccupied, so remote, it seemed charged with the same meaning.

Well, he supposed it could never have been, no matter what the time of his coming—doubtless he must appear old and solemn and ungainly to such a fresh young spirit; Miss Jocelyn, ages ago, had found him too old though really his senior—and Agnes was scarcely more than a child, taking into account his world-experience. No, it could never have been.

But the trouble lay in the fact that he had allowed himself to think it might be. He had not until now realized how far he had let himself go. During dinner, while Miss Jocelyn was heroically trying to sustain some sort of conversation, he whose life was spent in seeking to lighten others’ burdens, drooped under his own. When he looked at Agnes, it seemed to him that she had gone inside of some secret park or garden and had shut the gate and was seen only through the lattice, her feet on the eve of speeding away. And whatever Miss Jocelyn might talk about, however near she might try to

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

bring herself with smile and expression of interest, he knew she also was looking from over that fastened gate, in a sense casting farewell crumbs to the “Man-Who-Always-Came-Too-Late.”

If he had known that both were thinking of the approaching crisis when Theodore would ask for Agnes’ hand, he would have understood the cool abstraction of their manner, but that must have made his feelings only the more dismal. Even in his ignorance of the pending event, he was acutely conscious that for some reason his week’s vacation was beginning inauspiciously.

And what business had he with a week’s vacation, anyway? That, he asked himself when Miss Jocelyn remarked dryly: “You find us this evening with a most absorbing engagement on our hands, Philip——” Which signified that he was to keep out of the way.

That is why Agnes, fleeing the house to leave Miss Jocelyn and Theodore alone, found Philip in the rose arbor; he was keeping out of the way. He had heard a man’s step, a man’s voice, and had escaped to the roses.

“You here!” Agnes faltered, stopping still in the doorway. The moonlight was on her face, the roses were on either side, the breeze touched her hair to little waves and fluttered the dress about her feet. All nature said, “Look at her!” And yet she had come there purposely to hide.

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

Philip rose from the bench—"Yes, but I'll go away—anywhere——" For her tone of voice had plainly said: "What! can I not be alone at such a time as this?"

At the quality of his voice she came to herself—or rather she came to him, to the realization of his pathetic loneliness, his humble submissiveness. "No, you mustn't go," she faltered. Herself she asked, "How can I endure any one's society now, when my soul is tormented by uncertainties, when Theodore is learning the secret of my life?" The inner struggle made her voice more emphatic—"No, stay here—it is all right. I——"

"I will not stay," he declared, "for it is driving you away."

"Then I will stay with you." She came in and sank upon a rustic seat, and this giving way to great weariness seemed to him but an invitation to resume his place on the bench. The way his face lighted up smote her heart. Was he so glad just because he had not been driven away? What a solitary life—what a lonely man! She tried to think of him and to forget Theodore.

She asked him questions about his work of helping others to help themselves, and he was so pleased to find how well she remembered his rest rooms and eating-rooms that he expanded, amplified, and broached newly formed plans. She was very abstracted at first, but soon he had her warm, ab-

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

sorbed, responsive interest at the very hour when Theodore's love was being tested by the startling knowledge of her origin. This might have seemed an impossible task for any man, but Philip achieved it without dreaming of difficulties.

Presently he did more than that, entirely banished Theodore from her consciousness. “I have brought you some news—I saved it until we were alone because Lucia doesn't care for these matters, except in a second-handed way, that is, only because they interest us. Agnes—I have found Jasmine.”

Agnes was out of her seat—was beside him on the bench with her hand on his arm. . . . He was such a satisfactory man; the sort one can get close to without needing to think anything about it. Her questions were rapid, impetuous.

“It's been a long and tedious search—but never mind that. I saw how your heart was set upon her being found—so I found her; but that's principally why my long-looked-for visit with Lucia—and you—has been so delayed.

“No, she hasn't greatly changed—still looks girlish; the child is beautiful. She is not in want; he—you understand . . . the child's father sees to it that she is provided with money. I couldn't do anything, Agnes. All she asks is to be forgotten by the world; says she doesn't regret anything except for the child's sake.”

Agnes hid her face in her hands.

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

"I don't think it ever came out who the man is—at any rate, she gave me no hint, and her manner indicated that she meant to keep his name a secret. But he isn't altogether a bad sort, Agnes——"

"Oh!" Agnes protested, checking her tears.

"No, he isn't. It came about in the first place—the entanglement—because she thought marriage would ruin her career as a singer. She says it would have injured him, too, though she thought principally of herself. Last year the man went to her—she told me this with a good deal of pride, but with an inflexibility of manner wonderful to see—for she's so slight and girl-like—and he begged her to marry him; she'd lost her voice, so the marriage couldn't come in *her* way. But she wouldn't agree on account of him—the injury it would do his prospects and his family and all that."

Agnes whispered, "There's something of Clem in her, after all."

"I talked to her a long time, I tried to reason; it was no use. Of course I couldn't tell her of your interest since you've put away your old name, but I begged her to come to the Bad Lands and help me in my work. I think perhaps it may end that way."

"If it may!" Agnes breathed as if in prayer. "If it only may! I can't tell you what a load you've lifted from my heart—to know that she is not suf-

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

fering, is not in want—and may at last come to you and find her life-work——”

It was then that Theodore appeared in the doorway and for an instant Agnes stared at him as at a specter. Then she remembered everything and rose, her eyes bewildered, her breath irregular.

“May I speak to you a moment, Agnes?” asked Theodore, unable to conceal his disapproval of the animated conversation brought so abruptly to a close by his approach. Would they have gone on talking forever if he had stayed in the house? And, good heavens! how could Agnes talk at such a time? Did she fail to realize how much he was prepared to suffer on her account?

“Miss Jocelyn told me everything,” he announced, when they were midway between the arbor and the house. Then he exclaimed involuntarily, “Really, I think you never once doubted how I would receive the truth about—it!”

“How could I doubt?” she murmured, feeling as if in a sort of waking dream. “You wouldn’t be the man I believe you if I doubted.”

“Thank you, dear. Yes, it has made no difference to me, none at all. And your aunt says the secret will always be kept.”

“Yes,” Agnes answered simply, “on account of your career.”

“Not for my sake, Agnes; for yours,” he returned with strong feeling, taking her hand. “Be-

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

sides, your aunt has always had her heart set on keeping it. You mustn't feel—and she mustn't feel—that it is on my account.”

“It is for all your sakes. You couldn't want it generally known that I was once a little lady's-maid.”

“Agnes!” Because of Philip in the arbor, he could not draw her into his arms, but he pressed her hand fervently, “I loved that little lady's-maid, and I love this beautiful moonlight spirit so near to me and so dear; therefore I love you *double!*”

For the first time he had back his accustomed manner, but its charm was fleeting. Scarcely had the light in his handsome face assured her that she was really awake, when his voice grew restrained: “Are you *quite* sure that the girl who took care of your grandfather will never tell about—your past?”

“I'm as sure of Jenny Tildy as of Aunt Lucia. If you only knew her!”

“Then there's nobody to tell—it's impossible that your father, after all these years, should still be alive.”

XLIII

THE ENGAGEMENT

THE next morning when Agnes, according to her custom, came down early for her stroll before breakfast, she found Philip standing on the long, old-fashioned porch that extended the width of the house. She hesitated at the door in some confusion, blushing fleetingly, for she knew, from low-voiced manifestations of the night before, that he had been "told."

He stepped quickly forward with hand outstretched, and in a few deeply felt words, spoke of Theodore's work for reform, of the high regard in which the State held him, and of the virtual certainty of his election. Agnes had chosen a man who was——

Agnes had never doubted that Theodore was all Philip declared; yet she found herself unable to shake off a feeling of melancholy—an elusive depression that had been with her during the night. Was it because she had guessed Philip's love?—a guess not difficult, since Miss Jocelyn had prepared her for its blooming. At any rate there was nothing in

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

his manner or in his words to cloud her happiness. Sometimes, it is true, when he ceased speaking and she did not begin, his face settled into certain lines that hinted at jealous self-repression. But it might have been only that the light dazzled his eyes accustomed to the deep shadows of many-storied tenements; for that morning the light was dazzling—Agnes seemed to have caught the best of it on her face, which answered back like another risen dawn.

When Philip spoke of leaving Bellby soon after breakfast—“But I thought you had come to stay a week!” Agnes protested.

“Not *your* week,” he returned with a whimsical smile. “No, I should only be in the way—and I said all along that I’ve no business with a holiday; I don’t know what to do with it, now that it’s in my hand.” His smile was suddenly so deep and sweet that she could not smile back, so she stammered that she had intended to walk in the garden before breakfast—would he come?

“No, no, I’d just be in the way—I’m such a queer solemn sort of chap. Go your ways, my friend—and think about him; and may all your thoughts be flower-thoughts.”

Agnes did smile at that, and went down the steps swinging her hat in the delicious August breeze. At the bottom, she looked up: “What about your thoughts?”

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

“I shall have a flower-thought,” he responded inscrutably.

Agnes held up toward him her hand. “Come!” she commanded. And when he was beside her—“We were talking about Jasmine.” So, after all, he strolled with her along the rose-alleys, and they were so busy over plans of reconstructing Jasmine’s life—he was to go to her with renewed insistence on her coming to the Bad Lands—that breakfast was forgotten; breakfast and Miss Jocelyn—and Theodore.

Agnes would have preferred a quiet wedding at some period indefinitely remote, but Theodore insisted on an immediate formal announcement of the engagement and his mother declared for a church wedding with flowers and rings; and though the date finally agreed to was the day following the general election in November, Miss Jocelyn at once inaugurated the dynasty of the dressmakers.

The engagement, widely announced, filled much newspaper space, lending so much romance to the Reform champion when he appeared on the stump, that his opponent—married so long ago that he was fat and bald—refused to be seen in his company, which put an end to public debates. Reform was having it all her own way in these days.

Agnes could not insist on her preference for quiet functions because she was a little afraid of Theodore’s parents; they were proud and reserved and she imagined it was because they possessed rare

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

qualities of soul mysteriously buried too deep to betray the veins. In truth, Mrs. Veston was slightly ill at ease in society, fearing people might forget her husband had once been in Congress—as well they might since, but for his pose, he was extremely like his fellows. Agnes, taking this air of greatness at its face value, became timid in their presence, which by no means lessened her in their regard.

Miss Jocelyn, by virtue of her wealth—to say nothing of education and refinement—was as firmly established among the “best families” as any daughter of any Oldest Settler; consequently Agnes found herself the “honoree” at a great number of receptions to which only ladies were invited,—now single ladies, now married ladies, now mixed. An immense amount of subtle plotting was devoted to color schemes; flowers and favors; guessing contests such as how many words could be made out of the letters contained in Bellby; dainty food refreshing the eye rather than the inner man—all of which was in the end rewarded by little cries of “*Oh! Oh!*”

All life became pink-and-white, or blue-and-white, or green-and-white; when one entered houses one was greeted by the breath of flowers; from those with whom one came in contact, the unworthy had been discarded so that only charming smiles of friendliness were left. In vain might the minister remind one that all are sinners—who could feel oneself a sinner dwelling in the midst of perfumed congratula-

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

tions? The minister, however, had little to say about vanities; his business was not now to preach salvation, but to swell the subscription list.

As Agnes was pushed along breathless, feverish, through the sweet-scented weeks, she saw less and less of her lover and more and more of the outward forms of happiness—dresses and ceremonies, mere husks of empty hope unless transfused by the shy yet steadfast gleaming of a virgin love. If Agnes possessed this requisite, why did the days so often seem filled with mere chaff? Her heart-weariness sometimes made her question her heart; it, at all events, should not be weary—*it* did not have to stand for hours to be “tried on,” *it* had to do nothing but love Theodore with all its might: did it?

She had put the dream of her innocent girlhood into harness, and her mature hands could not drive it successfully.

XLIV

IN THE ROSE ARBOR

ONE rainy, mid-September afternoon, Agnes, crouching deliciously in the rose arbor, saw the hack stop next door. The "furnished cottage" had been offered vainly for rent ever since Miss Jocelyn came to Bellby, and Agnes felt regret that the people moving in had not come sooner; there was now little chance for acquaintanceship—with her wedding day approaching, and her time so occupied that but for the rain she would not have had this hour to herself.

A woman and a child, both closely wrapped up, hurried under umbrellas from the hack to the cottage door. The hackman carried in two trunks and several suitcases; and after the wheels had rattled away the sound of footsteps, where she had known only silence, kept her thoughts on the new neighbors.

The rose arbor was a leaky retreat, but Agnes, protected by her water-proof cloak, glowed in the cool, damp air, triumphant at having for once escaped her "aunt's" protecting watchfulness. It was no fun to Miss Jocelyn to stand on muddy ground, fine spray flying in every breeze that shook the dead

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

leaves, therefore she thought every one else would be better off beside a glowing fireplace with a book in his hand. But Miss Jocelyn did not appreciate Agnes' emotions when fancying her mother standing in that very spot, perhaps in just such a rain—when bringing back the figures of the past to linger the lifetime of her fancy where they had lived and loved—introducing these shades to the dream-image of Theodore. . . . Poor ghosts! they would never know her lover, except in her imagination.

The child came out of the cottage closing the door gently behind him as if to avoid disturbing the woman who had come with him in the hack. The gravity with which he marched down the sidewalk toward his front gate holding an umbrella stiffly perpendicular, made her laugh out merrily.

Catching the sound, he deflected toward the dividing fence, on a tour of investigation. In his short skirts, his rubber cap, his heavy boots, she found him a charming little man. His big blue eyes were serious and unafraid; his golden curls made the only splash of light in the gray day; his beautiful face, so innocent and fresh with health, turned all her merriment to tenderness.

He spoke with sharp decision: “Want over!”

She lifted him over the fence and carried him to the rose arbor, though he would far rather have walked. Here he stood under his umbrella regarding her intently except when the edge bobbed down before

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

his face; and his sudden, “I like it!” evidently included her in the generalization. He added explosively, as if presenting a phrase of which he was justly proud, “*In-deed* I do!”

She laughed again and would have caught him up but he let it be known that he did not submit to ladies’ embraces except when it was a matter of being lifted over barricades. She asked if he and his mother had come to live in the house next door.

“We have, *in-deed*. Are you *dlad*?”

“Oh, so very *dlad*! We must be great friends and as I’m to go away in a very little while, we must be friends real quick—we must begin at once with our names.”

“My name is T.V. with dots,” he volunteered. “You *write* the dots and you *say* ‘T.V.’ That’s my name.”

“Mine is Agnes—you must say Agnes.”

“Ag-nuss . . . Did you *haff* to be called ‘Ag-nuss’?”

She pretended despair: “Oh, dear! he doesn’t like my name!”

“Nemmine,” he soothed her; “it won’t hurt after ‘while.”

She laughed louder than before at his unexpectedness. “Then you must kiss it to make it well!” she cried, and this time lifted him in her arms—would not be denied. “My name is Agnes and I can’t help it; if you are very, very sorry for me, you won’t turn away.”

He allowed himself to be kissed.

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

As she admired his silken hair, she discovered a face watching them from a window of the house next door—a woman’s face, pale, unsmiling, that vanished at her startled glance. She had the impression of having been unjustly rebuked, for the mother’s blue eyes had not lighted in kindliness.

“Ag-nuss,” he mused, ignoring her suggestion. “Funny name! It is, in-deed.”

“Oh! is it, indeed?” she took from him his favorite word, leaving him rather at a loss. “And pray, what name does happen to meet with your approval?”

“High,” objected the child, raising his umbrella as far as his arms would stretch upward. He frowned: “High!”

At this just criticism that her phraseology was beyond his reach, she cried out delightedly, “Oh, you darling! How I could love you! Forgive me; what I meant to ask, is this: If you don’t like ‘Ag-nuss,’ what name *do* you like?”

The answer was prompt—“Jasmine.”

Agnes caught her breath. The face she had discovered watching from the window—the pretty mouth, the blue eyes, the blond hair . . . and the blue eyes and golden curls of this child, then the name—*Jasmine*—

She whispered, as if a hand were clutching at her throat, “Is that your mother’s name?”

He answered proudly, “It is, in-deed.”

“Come,” Agnes cried impulsively. “I’m afraid

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

Jasmine won't want you to stay out in the rain. I'll go home with you and carry you so you won't get muddy.”

“Want to get muddy,” he explained. “Boots are for—And mamma won't let you in, won't let anybody in—ever. But me.”

Agnes' heart cried with certainty, “It is Jasmine!” She said with confidence, “But she'll let me in—you'll see.”

“All right,”—he was evidently interested to watch the outcome of the experiment. “But you not carry me. Me walk under my own 'brelly. I do, in-deed!”

Evidently Jasmine had seen them coming, for the door opened at once, and Agnes was confronted by her former mistress—no longer the high-spirited child of ambition rounded in the curving lines of youth and beauty, but the woman of grim loveliness, her face darkened by many sorrows.

Jasmine looked at her in stony silence, and Agnes tried her best to return the look with the eyes of a stranger.

“I have made friends”—Agnes spoke hurriedly—“with your son. If we—my aunt and I—can be of any assistance while you are moving in—if there is any service——”

“No one can be of service to me,” Jasmine interrupted. “For I need no help, and I want no friends.”

The door slammed with sharp definiteness, leaving Agnes standing on the steps in the rain.

XLV

A MAN WHO WOULDN'T "GO BY"

TO find her living next door after longing so earnestly to know of her whereabouts seemed a coincidence partaking of the miraculous. And never to see her, though next door, save as a pale face gliding from a window on being observed, oppressed her with a sense of mystery. However weary at night, Agnes would not go to bed till she had seen her neighbor's light extinguished; it was, to her fancy, like keeping watch over one who, after all, gave as much grateful recognition as usually falls to the lot of the guardian angel.

The child played in the yard all day, but played alone, talking and laughing to himself. Very small indeed he appeared when, with his red cap on one side of his golden head and his tiny hands buried in the beloved pockets of his wide-skirted brown cloak, he would march to town for the mail.

Standing so far below the window in the mailbox-partition that the postmaster would not have known of his presence if he hadn't been hailed, the boy, in a shrill sweet voice, would ask if there was "any-fing

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

for Mrs. Jasmine Everett.” Yes, that is what he had been taught to call her—Mrs. Jasmine Everett; the same name she had always borne except now, alas! there was that “Mrs.” . . .

Who wasn’t sorry that she had selected as her residence, Bellby—of all places!—Bellby, where her whole history was as well known as the courthouse clock that had never kept time. As to the child, there seemed really nothing to do about him but to quicken one’s footsteps at his approach and look another way.

No wonder T. V. adored Agnes! She was constantly darting from the house to give him candy or a bit of cake or a toy—this, of course, in brief breathing-spaces of her tryings-on and fittings-out. Sometimes she brought him nothing but a loving word; and it was all one to him—he began smiling when he saw her door opening.

They had a game of playing that it was a Fairy that brought the candy or the toy, whose home was in the arbor, and whatever they said about it—there were allusions which nobody else would possibly have understood—produced irresistible laughter; to stress the point endangered one from one’s gaspingly heart-searching gurgles of exquisite delight. Just to mention Fairy—just to *look* Fairy—made the corners of T. V.’s eyes crinkle deep to catch sunbeams.

Jasmine did not oppose this intimacy, simply pretended to be unaware of it—but always Agnes knew

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

her pale face was watching from behind some screen.

One day T. V. said with that fickleness from which even babies are not exempt— "Just Ag-nuss! Never no more, just Ag-nuss!" Then he reached up his chubby arms as if appealing to the very heavens for company and exclaimed, "I want a *man*!" His terrible scarcity of words made the mighty longing a dangerous thing to harbor. His eyes became immense with the unutterable. He swept his hands through space— "They go by—they go by." He pointed at the fence, then stamped his foot. "*I want a man!*" He burst into sobs.

Agnes knelt upon the grass and drew him into her arms. "There, there, dear! I'll bring you one—he's coming on a visit to our house this very day—he's a real man—the sort of man you need, the kind that doesn't 'go by.' Just as soon as he takes your hand in his, you'll know you've found a friend. . . ."

Theodore had written Agnes that he would be in Bellby that afternoon; but Agnes was not referring to Theodore.

XLVI

THE SONG OUT OF THE PAST

PHILIP came; and when it developed that he had deserted important affairs solely to inform them that he had traced Jasmine to the cottage next door, and when Miss Jocelyn in affectionate despair over his slowness again called him the Man-Who-Always-Came-Too-Late, Agnes found something strangely appealing in his discomfiture, in his eagerness to please, in the very title given him. And when he went with her to visit the child next door, a thought stirred within which she did not seek to banish—Suppose he had *not* come too late, what then? Such thoughts in question-form surely could not bring harm, if one were very resolute in refusing to try to answer them.

That was a glorious day for little T. V.—a day that even made Philip blink his eyes as if Agnes were too strong a light. Did Agnes like it? So well, and with such warm solicitude in Philip's work, that as they strolled back to their own side of the fence—leaving T. V. in the sleep of exhausted pleasure—Philip said:

“Do you remember, the first time you visited

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

Lucia, how you listened to the sounds in her shells, and how she told you about the great ocean?”

Agnes wondered that he should know about it.

“Oh, Lucia has told me everything about you, from first to—to Theodore.” He brought in that name as a sort of official recognition of the powers that be. It did not make her blush, or even feel like blushing. Many receptions and blatant newspaper “write-ups” had worn the name of marriage as smooth as a How-do-you-do. So she only smiled at him gently not because of what he said; because he was Philip, perhaps.

“You remind me of the shells,” he said, speaking carefully as if to pick out the truest words; he felt that all true words were true to her, but the great majority were sadly inadequate. “When you were a child, you lay so close to the heart of the poor and wretched that you caught their sob and moan, the note of their eternal need. It sounds in your heart to-day as the sea sounds in the shell, and when I listen, I hear your love and pity for the unfortunate. I wonder if it will ever bring you back to the Bad Lands! I suppose not, since fortune has beckoned you another way. But I shall always be there; should you ever grow dissatisfied with the heights, you’ll know where to find me; and as I battle in that sea of misery it will comfort me to know that its echo is in your soul.”

It sounded like a farewell, and in a sense it was,

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

for Philip had made up his mind never again to endanger the secret of his love.

Before knowing of Theodore's purpose to spend that evening at Bellby, Miss Jocelyn, Philip and Agnes had arranged to attend a musicale given for the benefit of the New Church. The arrival of Theodore's note to Agnes asking that he might spend the evening with her, had come too late to insure their isolation in the front room, where occasionally he had addressed a crowd on politics—Agnes being the beginning and ending of the crowd—under the delusion that he was making conversation.

She had looked forward to the musicale with dreamy satisfaction, not only because she was passionately fond of violin music, and this J. Earle, Musical Director of a southern college, was announced as an expert, but because Miss Jocelyn, equally appreciative, would share her enjoyment. And Philip would be with them, which was always pleasant.

They reached the opera house late, according to Bellby etiquette, but the musician, owing to an automobile breakdown, had not yet appeared. Agnes, seated between Theodore and Philip with Miss Jocelyn on Philip's right, was silent and expectant. About them, the gathering audience laughed and greeted each other informally across aisles and over tiers of seats, and as the only means of entrance was a staircase coming up from the bowels of a hardwood

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

store, the noise of feet on the uncarpeted boards was continuous. To add to the difficulty of small-talk, some children who had been there over an hour, occasionally relieved their pent-up energies by clapping and beating upon the floor in unison; demonstrations delightedly prolonged when their indignant but helpless elders cast upon them black looks.

In spite of these difficulties, Miss Jocelyn was able without much apparent effort to tell Theodore about the musician. He had written offering his entertainment without price, even proposing to pay for the house out of his own pocket. Such an unusual offer had of course brought forth many admiring comments, and his generosity for the Cause was expected to be offset by a very full attendance.

So absorbed was Agnes that she was only dimly conscious of a sudden quieting of the audience. She understood subconsciously that the belated musician had arrived, had been announced from the stage, and, without accompanist, was about to open the concert; and she waited with downcast eyes, incurious as to the performer, but yearning for a master-touch to send the comfort of divine strains to meet her in the dark and help her groping hands toward the light.

Almost at the first note she felt that her desire was to be satisfied. A delicate air, exquisitely refined, stole softly out upon the expectant room, seeming to come straight from the violin to its second

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

home in her heart. Surely it had visited her before, for it seemed a dear and familiar guest. Had she not heard it on the streets of Naples when she first went thither with her protectress? Certainly it belonged to her younger years, for she found it interwoven with a child's fresh love of the flowers along the woods and birds up-springing from country fences in the early dawn.

No, it did not belong to Italy. Where, then? Suddenly before her mental vision flashed a city street; three travel-stained wanderers were hurrying past a window from which came the voices of young men and women singing. Could that little ragged child beside Jenny Tildy be herself? The blind man in their leading was her father, and she could hear him again say with a note of pride that the song they heard was of his own composition. The musician was playing that song on his violin.

Awed by this recognition, Agnes looked up. The musician could not look back into her startled eyes, could not know that she was in the room, for he was blind. Otherwise he must have seen and known, in spite of the changes that had come. For “J. Earle, Musical Director,” was John Earle, her father.

XLVII

JOHN EARLE'S RETURN

HE was her father, but he was not the man who had cowered in the misery and squalor of the Bad Lands, had wandered, a homeless outcast, from village to village, had lived for a brief time in Bellby under the protection of two young girls. So greatly did Agnes find him changed that the fact of his being musical director of a college was lost sight of; the miracle was not that of position but of self. The ease and dignity with which he stood before the hushed audience, the spiritual light of his uplifted face where eyes counted for nothing and soul for all, the strong sure arms and shoulders, the upright form—all told of a new man; a new man—yet her father.

How splendidly he had triumphed, not only over physical limitations, but over the far more serious handicap of inner weakness, she had only to look to see; and looking, the color of filial pride flushed her cheeks, while her eyes were brilliantly suffused, as if she had added to her own soft and tender shining

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

the light that was never again to beam in her father's eyes.

The moment the playing ceased—“Aunt Lucia!” Agnes whispered.

Philip was between, but he drew back as far as possible and Miss Jocelyn, suddenly aware that something was amiss, bent toward her just as the house burst into applause.

Agnes' eyes were wide, her lips dry—

“Don't be startled, Aunt Lucia—try not to seem surprised—though it's the most wonderful thing!—like a miracle——”

“I'm quite calm,” smiled Miss Jocelyn; “not a nerve shall quiver—you'll see! What has happened down there in the chambers of your heart?” She knew very well nothing had happened between Agnes and Theodore, since they had exchanged no whispered word.

“The violinist—he is——” Suddenly Agnes' face flushed with the rosy warmth of pride. “Aunt Lucia! —It's *Father!*”

Miss Jocelyn cast a glance toward the musician, who had seated himself for a minute's rest, then looked at Agnes. True to her promise, not a nerve quivered—visibly. But the expression of her face changed; from that of one who smiles upon a well-beloved, it became at once inscrutable.

“And—and Aunt Lucia! Don't be too surprised—but I *must* be alone and—and think what's to be

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

done, because—it will make such a difference! Would you mind if I slipped home to think about it? I'd like to be there when father comes. . . . You'll bring father, of course?"

"Of course."

"And you won't let—let anybody follow me?"

"Not even Philip!" Miss Jocelyn whispered.

XLVIII

CLEM'S DAUGHTER

THE autumn night was softly aglow from a slender moon as Agnes hurried homeward, and a misty haze paled the blue of the sky and softened the edges of the world. It seemed to her that for months she had not drawn a deep full breath because of some constricting foreboding, which, to have acknowledged even to herself, would have seemed disloyal. Even on the way to the musicale she had but barely tasted the draught of early October with its flavor of ripe fruits, its pungent odors of newly turned earth, its bonfires of dead leaves about which the children were dancing.

But now—Nature's cup was brimming at her lips and in her excitement she could not steady her hand to drink deep enough. Her father—her future! That is what his return signified. Her girl's dream of Theodore had been as pure and sweet as her girl's heart, but it had been wearing pretty thin—he had been coming through, here and there, a real man, a Theodore who would never agree to accept her from her father's hand, a Theodore who could never under-

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

stand her passionate pride in that transformed father.

It was the full consciousness of what her father meant to her and what he would mean to Theodore that showed her as by sudden, blinding light that the dream had been, and could only have been, a dream. Now she was awake; she knew that she was a woman and had never loved, and had never really been loved. She seemed escaping from she knew not what, and she breathed the air thrillingly as if for some time a hand had been held upon her mouth.

Hurrying toward the summer house with the intention of waiting there until the others' coming, she was startled at the sound of passionate sobbing. Some one—a woman—believing herself in a deserted spot, had abandoned herself to agonized grief, and her smothered cries were those of one whose pain is past bearing. They must have moved any passing stranger with pity—they drew Agnes on flying feet, her eyes suffused with answering tears.

“Jasmine—don't run away—it is only Agnes! Not ‘Miss Jocelyn,’ just Agnes, your little maid—let me be your friend again—I loved you so dearly, just as I do to-night. . . .”

Agnes did not know what she was saying as she rushed forward and sank upon her knees beside the convulsed form on the rustic bench; she did not try to think of anything to say—but she did put Clem in every quivering tone of her appealing voice.

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

Jasmine grew rigid. The sympathy was unmistakable; the revelation of Agnes' identity for a moment roused her out of herself and her sobs were stifled. But then—the great bitterness remained; what else mattered? She gasped hoarsely—“You've taken everything else from me—oh, I ask nothing from the world—nothing from you—but solitude for my broken heart. But I was wrong to come here where you and he enjoy your love—let me go.”

“I will not let you go,” Agnes clung to her, “till you tell me what I have taken from you.”

“It is no great mystery; there has never been any other man in my life.”

Agnes' hands fell away, and they stood facing each other in the pale light. “No—other—man?” she repeated, bewildered. And she thought of the child.

“When I read of his engagement I came to Bellby to study at close quarters the woman who was to have my place—how little I suspected my rival was my former maid!”

She laughed bitterly. “Of course he doesn't know I'm here, nobody would mention my name to him, and he's never at home long enough to find out the truth. After the wedding, nobody'll ever hear of me again. Up to the time of your engagement, he was always trying to find me to persuade me to marry him in spite of all—for I'm the one thing in the world he loves better than his ambition. But I refused to let

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

him spoil my career, and now that I've lost my chance, I don't mean to spoil his. There! You have the truth about him. You'd never have known it, no, not even afterwards, if you'd only kept out of my life.”

“Jasmine,” said Agnes, putting her arms about her before the astonished woman could protest, and speaking as if the other's words had been full of a mother's appeal for little T. V.—“I thank God that the truth has not come too late. Long, long ago I heard God say ‘Come——’ and surely He has given me freely of the water of the river of life!”

Jasmine could not have repelled her then; but before she could yield, they were startled by footsteps on the path.

“Save me, Agnes,” whispered Jasmine, panic-stricken, as to a sister.

Agnes hurried out and confronted Theodore in the moonlight, noting with understanding heart his stern, cold face.

“Your father”—he spoke the phrase with unconscious harshness—“is on the way; I've hurried ahead to know exactly what attitude toward him you mean to take.”

Looking at him with suddenly luminous eyes—“The attitude of a child whose father is her glory,” she said. “We have made a great mistake, Theodore, but it isn't too late to correct it—give me back my promise, it's best for us both.” Still looking

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

very steadily, it was as when in the crowded street one thinks he has recognized a familiar face which, on closer scrutiny, proves that of a stranger.

“Well,” he said, his lips thin, “it shall be as you wish.”

She came to his side and laid her hand upon his unresponsive arm: “Theodore, which would you rather be—the Governor of the State, or the husband of the mother of your child?”

He shrank away as if blinded by a sudden dazzling light. The next moment he had caught both her hands—“Agnes, have you found where she is? Agnes, blessed Agnes! have you moved her heart?” He had forgotten everything else. The idea of marriage with Agnes carried with it the weight of her father’s disgrace; but there was no such weight when he thought of Jasmine—because he loved Jasmine.

From the rose arbor came a half-stifled sob. Theodore read in Agnes’ eyes the answer to his question. Before running to the arbor, he kissed her upon the brow, a kiss of farewell and benediction. Left alone, she looked up through tears. The moon was very low, bright stars were glittering—how beautiful the peace of those dwelling in abodes whose signal-lamps have been set in the sky! “Clem knows,” thought Agnes.

XLIX

THE ENGAGEMENT ENDED

SHE was at the gate before John Earle, led by Miss Jocelyn, reached it, and in her excited joy, Philip was not missed. Tall and erect, well-formed and confident of air, as though each step of the way was plainly discernible, he advanced with one hand lightly touching Miss Jocelyn's arm, the other swinging his violin-case. So different was he from her father of the Bad Lands, and of all most different in the noble expression of his countenance as revealed by the moonlight, that here, at least, Agnes found a reality beyond the etching of her fondest dream.

"Father!" She was in his arms, clinging passionately, sobbing with happy pride; "Father, my beautiful, beautiful father!"

"No one need tell me," cried John Earle triumphantly, "who this is!" And he folded her to his breast while Miss Jocelyn turned away, her eyes dimmed. "Poor Agnes!—if only I could have come back to comfort you for all the sorrows in your life!"

"You do comfort me," she sobbed, leading him

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

tenderly toward the house. She made a supreme effort at self-command. “I have been very unhappy, lately, but the burden is lifted, and oh—father, my heart is singing! I have you at last—and there is heavenly comfort on your dear blind face.”

They reached the house; he let her lead him beyond the portal he had thought never again to pass, and as she studied him lovingly by the hall light, he passed his fingers over her face, held his cheek to hers, and stroked her heavy hair. “How tall, how lovely!” he murmured. “What a wonderful girl—a miracle!—a miracle of a girl! Do you remember that I said so, years ago? But Agnes . . . I thought you in Italy with Miss Jocelyn. I came to Bellby believing there was not the possibility of this meeting. You have never taken my name, no one in town knows of the relationship.” He added, anxiously, “Whatever I do cannot affect your life, dear.”

“But we are never to part,” she returned confidently. She added with a smile that she let shine in her voice so he could know of it, “And I haven’t any life without you—not another day.”

He was silent for a moment; evidently something was on his mind that he hesitated to communicate, knowing it would sadden her. He let her lead him to the sitting-room where, after a time, he told something of the years since their last parting.

“I’m not the drunken wretch you used to hide from, little girl. You’ve never known me as I am

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

to-day. Your mother did; except that I am blind. But I don't speak boastfully, God knows; there's nothing in my life to boast of—but you. Unless to praise one's child is self-love, I'm very humble.”

“I shall boast of you,” Agnes cried, nestling close.

“Did Jenny Tildy tell you how I let the boat drift away with me?”

“Yes, father, I know.”

“I was picked up and carried on from chance to chance——”

“Chance!” Agnes laughed tenderly.

“—Until I was selected as the head of the music department in a college for the blind.”

“How easy it sounds!” Agnes mocked. “Just a few words and all is told. But I know the years of striving and toiling and disappointed hopes and heroic patience that make those few words possible.”

“Did Jenny Tildy explain my object?”

“She told me you meant to prove yourself a true man, if you were spared from the river. And you have done more than that; not only a true man, but a great one.”

“But—but didn't she tell you the rest?”

Agnes tried to remember. “It was so long ago; I can't bring it all back. It was just at that time that Aunt Lucia came to take me abroad, and so much of the old life seemed to slip away.”

“I see . . . I see.” And he fell silent. On the way from the opera house Miss Jocelyn had insisted

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

on his remaining with her several days—as many as he could spare from college work; seeing him now evidently depressed, and supposing weariness the cause, the girl spoke of the lateness of the hour. He rose, with a sigh, for Agnes to take him to his room.

“Yes, yes,” he murmured gently. “I will wait till morning to tell the rest—for there is something more to be said; something very grave, very important.” And when at his door he kissed Agnes goodnight, he said wistfully, in answer to her cheery words of love, “My dear—do not be too happy, not too happy. You’ll know in the morning what I mean, but sleep well to-night and forget the morning is coming. You see—I will say only this, now: I am not worthy. And—and I am afraid you will be too happy.”

It was about two hours later when Philip, who all this time had been wandering about town in order to leave John Earle a clear field, tried to slip through the hall to his own room unnoticed. Miss Jocelyn, however, had been waiting in the front room to intercept him, and in response to her whispered command, he went in to her, gently closing the door.

“You are surprised to find me up,” she said, cautiously modulating her voice.

“No,” returned Philip, sitting beside her and studying her face, “I am too amazed over what I have heard down town, to respond just now to any other sensation.”

“In that case,” she returned coolly, “I presume

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

it leaves you quite unmoved to learn that the engagement between Agnes and Theodore has been broken off!"

"Has been broken off!" he echoed, rising involuntarily. "Has been broken off, you say? Is—*now?*" His face was a study of conflicting emotions.

"I couldn't help flinging it at you, Philip, you were so armor-clad,—it seemed nothing but a stunning blow could make you reel."

"But——" He sat down, his face growing paler and paler. "Lucia, tell me what you mean."

"After Agnes' father had gone to bed, she came down to have a long talk with me. She told me. And it is broken off. She found out that it had always been a mistake—not from my telling her, for I could have told her that from the beginning. Girls don't learn such truths, I suppose, from being told."

"Did she seem—is it"—his voice sank to a pained whisper—"do you think it has struck her as a heavy blow?"

"I never saw her happier in my life."

The color swept to his face.

"She never did love him and he'd never loved her, and to-night she ended it. She's suspected this for some time, but wouldn't let herself think—there were all the receptions to go to and the dresses to be made—she thought she *must* love him. Seemed that it *had* to go on. But it's off——"

Miss Jocelyn was jubilant.

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

“It’s off!” he echoed, seemingly incapable of forming words of his own, hence driven to express his surcharged emotions through those she furnished. “OFF!” Then, with intensity—“Lucia, I love that girl!”

“I know you do, Philip.”

“Yes, you know I do. I Do—I love her as—as no man ever loved before.”

“Go on,” she smiled, “don’t mind me.”

He checked himself abruptly, but the smile in her eyes reassured him.

Still, he could not altogether forget the past, so he did not amplify. “I wonder,” he said, “if there is any connection between the broken engagement and what I heard down town? The broken engagement—oh, how sweet a sound! . . . I was on Main Street when the hack passed taking Veston from Bellby. It was otherwise empty except for a woman and child all muffled up—strangely muffled up, I thought, considering the mild weather. One of your local politicians, standing on a corner, recognized Veston and called something about making it hot for the enemy in his next speech. Veston leaned out and shouted back—‘No more speeches for me! I’m going to draw off from the running!’ That’s why I was so stunned when I came home. Can he really mean to give up, with the prize almost in his hand?”

Then she told, as Agnes had a short time ago told her, the story of Jasmine.

L

A LIFE FOR A LIFE

THEY did not call John Earle, the next morning, until Philip had left on the early train, so, after his late breakfast, he found himself alone in the house of sad memories with Miss Jocelyn and his daughter. They supposed the expression of his face a reflection of thoughts induced by the familiar walls which must have been for him impregnated with the spirit of dead years; but when he stood before them, his hands folded on the back of his chair, his uplifted countenance seeming to catch a light not of that room, they began to understand.

"I did not tell you all, last night," he said simply. "When I came to myself, ten years ago—as I like to think, to my *real* self—there seemed only one thing to do: give my life as the only atonement I could make for the life I had taken. I felt that to have gone then to the officers of the law to confess my crime—a homeless wanderer, a wreck, a creature without even a name—would have been mockery. For I was worth nothing; what could it have mattered if they had inflicted the severest penalty of the law?"

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

The man I had killed was young and strong and noble; I was not a man, only a drifting thing. So I told myself I would let the river swallow me up and maybe God would count that for something; but that if I escaped, I would work day and night, day and night, until I had made myself respected, until I had a place in the world. I said that if the time ever came when I was a man among men, an honored man among honorable men, I would come back to Bellby and confess all.”

“But, Mr. Earle,” Miss Jocelyn faltered, “that was so long ago!”

“I killed my wife’s brother. The number of years that have passed cannot make it any less a murder, and you know that before the law drunkenness is no excuse. It is not for me, however, to guess at what my sentence may be; my part is to give myself up. Had all my labor been to raise myself to a post of honor when by right I should have stood in the pillory of shame, I had better remained the broken creature who dared not set foot in this house where my deserted wife died. I can stand here and hold up my head only because I have done something with my life and mean to give it all, thanking God that I have something to give, to atone for my crime.”

There was a ring of such absolute sincerity in his voice, a look of such serene dignity on his brow, that Miss Jocelyn did not know what to say. Agnes had gone to him and now stood with her arm about his

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

waist as if to protect him from invisible dangers.

"Father," Agnes said in a low voice, "do you feel that what you did so long ago stands between you and perfect peace?"

"It must seem very long ago to you, my dear, but to me it was but yesterday; and to God, it is to-day. I can have no peace with this secret in my heart. To hide my guilt from the world is to hide myself from God. That is how I feel about it, but perhaps after all I am not worthy to offer the sacrifice; and if I am not to have that perfect peace, who am I to complain?"

"You are worthy," Agnes said, the tears streaming down her cheeks.

He faltered, suddenly losing his tone of serene conviction, "Darling, you wouldn't let a thing like this—my duty—you wouldn't let it grieve you too deeply?"

"You shall confess, father, you must have the perfect peace that I have known. Shall it be now? I will lead you to the officers, I will hold your hand, I will go with you, if it must be, to the prison bars. Yes, I will show you the way——" She turned wildly to Miss Jocelyn: "Aunt Lucia, it must be so. Ten years he has worked for this, and it must be right, oh, surely it is the only way! You won't forbid me to lead him along this hard way to his peace?"

Miss Jocelyn looked at them in mute despair as they clung together. For a few moments she was

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

silent, helpless before this unforeseen difficulty which seemed insurmountable. Then she began speaking very slowly, feeling that if she could not gain a little time, all her work for Agnes and all her happiness that was built upon Agnes, would be lost.

“I do not forbid it, no, dear. These ideas of duty which no doubt your father learned from your uncomplaining childhood elude my imagination, but I know to you they are life’s great realities. To you, God is a loving and protecting Presence; your faith is in your blood. It is just so with poor Philip. So I do not forbid it—I dare not. As long as your heart beats, your faith beats with it. But I ask you both to wait.”

Her voice grew calmer, more assured. The mention of Philip had given her an idea. What a pity that he had left before this revelation! A letter could not reach him for several days, and even if a telegram caught him on his way . . . She added:

“Surely it is not too much for me to request a few days’ time to—to accustom myself—and you. Please wait until——” She stopped, her sudden hope growing dim. Philip was very resourceful in time of trouble, but would not John Earle’s purpose appeal to him as worthy of all aid and encouragement?

Earle thought her hesitation sprang from her fear lest he refuse to grant Agnes a brief respite. “I thought to go this morning,” he sighed, “but after all you have done for my darling, how could I deny

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

you anything? I will wait—yes, if you insist, I will wait a week, before giving myself up.”

“I insist,” she answered promptly, but her tone was still far from assured.

Half an hour later, she telegraphed for Philip. “Come at once,” her message read; “Agnes needs you.”

LI

LOVE FINDS A VOICE

INSTEAD of going straight back to his mission, Philip was sidetracked by one of those cries for help at the very elbow which few heed, knowing to answer means giving something not only of one's means but of one's self. The man in immediate distress presented a case popularly known as "not worthy," hence Philip, according to his wont, gave all the more. This is why Miss Jocelyn's telegram not only failed to catch him on the way, but did not find him at the journey's end.

They were days of sorrow and suspense to Agnes. She had known from the first of the telegram to Philip, but had understood only that he had been sent for to help her father do his duty—take him to the proper authorities at the right time and in the manner most suitable. She was glad for him to come; it would be a relief to lean upon his strong arm at the time of crisis; but even this could bring no gleam of happiness. Her father, after confession, must be imprisoned, and his trial must result in confinement for a number of years.

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

During these days, she often slipped away to visit the wharf, thus escaping well-meant calls. Usually her father went with her, and they would sit in the shadow of a long shed, resting on the worn-out skiff, for the most part in pensive silence. The murmur of the river in the piles beneath haunted them with the mystery of something that was always moving on, yet was always there, like their own souls.

One day—the last but one of the week John Earle had agreed to wait—Agnes went alone, and, as she told herself, for the last time during her father’s liberty, to watch the melting of light in shade along the wood-bound shore. Hours passed, yet she felt she could not return to her father without distressing him by an outburst of grief. Accordingly, on reaching home, she sought the rose arbor to which the leaves only of the most hardy vines still clung.

It was here that she was presently startled by a man’s quick, brisk footsteps and before she could look around, she knew Philip had come.

Though she believed his coming could change nothing of the tragic morrow, she was conscious of a great relief inspired by his mere presence, as one, weighted down by coming calamity, may nevertheless respond instinctively to the unexpected sunshine and the sudden bursting into song of happy birds.

“Oh, Philip,” she faltered, rising blindly, “I—I thought you were not coming!” She held out her hands, hardly knowing what she did. “Now you will

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

stay with us, won't you—to the end, to the very end?”

“Always.” He would have taken her hands, but she had covered her face with them, for the tears were raining down her cheeks. He drew her to him tenderly and she did not draw away, but he had known she would not, for that broken cry—“I thought you were not coming!”—had told him all he had longed to know.

“No more tears, Agnes!” he said softly. “Look up—I’ve been talking to your father, and his mind is changed. He’ll not confess that crime—a crime that the world has forgotten and which could only be revived by striking at you and those who love you.”

“Do you mean,” Agnes faltered, her heart giving a great leap, “that he thinks it would be *right* to keep the secret?”

“He is sure of it. As soon as the message reached me I came, of course, and when Lucia explained, all was quite clear to me. Your father is right in thinking he should give his life for the life he took. But God doesn’t want lives behind iron doors and iron bars. Where He needs His lives is out in the world, free and untrammelled where they can offer perfect service. It’s not a chain He wants on John Earle’s arm, but the violin, and the bow in his free hand; and he’s coming with me to the Bad Lands, bringing his music and his chastened and purified heart, to dedicate all to those who sit in darkness.”

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

“And you have persuaded him that this is best!” Agnes stammered, trying to realize the difference Philip’s coming had meant. She would have drawn away, for hitherto she had been wholly unaware of her position, and as she tried to free herself, the color mounted to her cheeks.

But he held her to his breast. “Agnes, you will not desert your father?”

“Never.”

“But he is going with me. If you stay with him, don’t you see you can’t escape me?” He rested his hand upon her head. “Agnes, you are still to be as you were from the beginning—Agnes of the Bad Lands. And you have asked me, and I have promised, to stay with you to the end.”

Then she looked up and found that the careworn face of the Man-Who-Always-Came-Too-Late was touched by a singular light which, in her eyes, gave beauty to every line that had been deepened upon it by the sorrows of others. And the thought that, after all, he had not come too late, and that through his wisdom and patience the dark path for her father was full of hope and promise, taught her to know her heart. So she did not seek again to draw away.

He was trying to tell her how he had felt at their first meeting, and how the hopelessness of ever winning her heart had kept him away, when they heard a slender thread of melody float out upon the still October air. With his arm about her, Philip led the

“AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS”

way to the door of the retreat and nodded toward the house. John Earle had come out upon the porch, his violin under his chin—such a changed face! Meek surrender, serene self-abnegation had been replaced by a vital aim that changed the whole attitude of the man. If, before, his countenance had suggested a cold unlighted window looking steadily out upon a wintry scene through which the course of duty led unwaveringly, now it was all aglow with the pure fire of a great purpose that flamed on the hearthstone of his soul.

Miss Jocelyn, too, had come out to breathe the balminess of the autumnal haze, and her countenance told plainly enough that all she had hoped for was about to come to pass. The Bad Lands, indeed, were not for her, but in her splendid mansion on the Avenue, she could camp close enough to maintain daily relations with her beloved. So radiant was her face that for the first time Agnes realized how terribly the past week had borne upon her heart.

She looked from the arbor door, thrilled to breathless wonder by the thought that it was Philip who had as by a miracle insured happiness to four lives—happiness of which each might well be proud. John Earle's exultant spirit had burst into passionate music; Miss Jocelyn was smiling her great content; Philip's face was aglow with the sacredness of his first great passion; while she——

“I love you,” Agnes exclaimed, impulsively.

"AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS"

Of course he had known, else she would not have rested so quietly in his arms, she would not have cried out blindly, "I thought you were not coming!" But, though he knew her love had never been another's, and that it had at last come to him, her words seemed to bring something new into his life—something wonderfully precious and beautiful. For when the heart first says, "I love you," the world is created anew.

THE END

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